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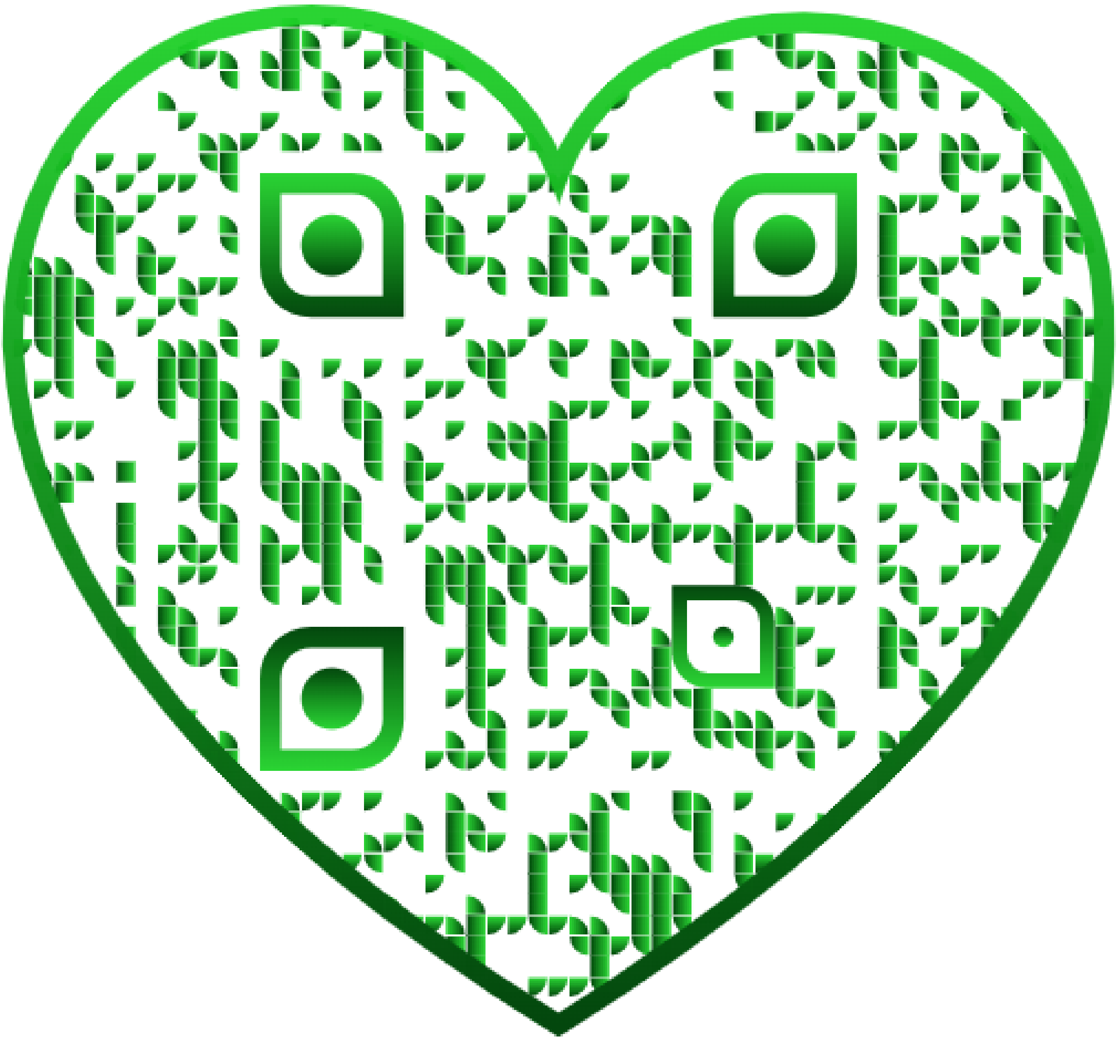

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Cover photo:
Staff Sgt. Zachary Rufus/Air Force

GIANCARLO CASEM/AIR FORCE; AIRMAN 1ST CLASS MASON HARGROVE/AIR FORCE

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ON THE RADAR

SRA HARRISON WINCHELL/AIR FORCE

AIR FORCE REVAMPS SPECIAL OPERATIONS WING RELOCATING TO ARIZONA

The U.S. Air Force has modified its plans to relocate the 492nd Special Operations Wing to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona, the service announced.

The 492nd, previously a training wing supporting Air Force Special Operations Command, is currently in the process of transitioning into a new role as a power projection wing, which will see it carry out a wide variety of special operations forces missions, including strike, surveillance, intelligence and SOF mobility.

While the plan to relocate the wing to Arizona was originally approved in 2023, the plan has since been “refined” to reflect current Defense Department goals regarding cost efficiency and mission priorities, according to a service release.

The new plan will see three additional units moved to the base as part of the 492nd, in addition to the four originally planned to transfer.

The four original units relocating to Arizona include 492nd Special Operations Wing Headquarters, the 492nd Special Operations Theater Air Operations Squadron, 319th Special Operations Squadron — all currently located in Florida — and the Air Combat Command Intelligence Squadron.

Joining them now will be the New Mexico-based 20th Special Operations Squadron and 20th Special Operations Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, as well as the 34th Special Operations Squadron, which is currently in Florida.

The relocation will take place following an environmental analysis, which will begin this fall, according to the Air Force.

Davis-Monthan Air Force Base currently supports six combatant commanders worldwide and was named the best base in the service in 2018.

The base is home to the 335th Wing, 12th Air Force, 55th Electronic Combat Group and 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group, in addition to the Air Force Reserve’s 943rd Rescue Group and the Arizona Air National Guard’s 214th Attack Group.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection also has a presence on base. ■

AIR FORCE, NORWAY SINK SHIP IN MARITIME STRIKE EXERCISE

The U.S. Air Force and the armed forces of Norway conducted a joint exercise in September which saw both allies cooperate seamlessly to send a ship to the bottom of the Norwegian Sea.

A B-2 Spirit stealth bomber of the 53rd Wing flew in cohesion with Royal Norwegian Air Force F-35s and Norwegian personnel to sink a surface vessel, using the U.S. Air Force’s QUICKSINK anti-ship weapon.

The QUICKSINK is a ship-killing munition that can destroy surface vessels immediately on impact using smart technology. A new 500-pound version tested earlier this year has expanded the targeting capabilities of the B-2 and its ability to deliver more rapid stealth strikes.

“We are very pleased that the Americans want to test such new weapons together with Norwegian forces,” Lt. Col. Vegard Finberg, head of communications for the Norwegian Armed Forces, told Military Times. “This shows that the United States prioritizes maintaining stability and security in the High North. Stability in the High North is important for Norwegian, European and American security.

“In addition to the operational contribution, Norway also provided the U.S. forces with access to infrastructure and airspace, making it possible to conduct the test in a demanding environment,” Finberg said.

During the exercise, Norwegian forces facilitated operational support for the B-2, which delivered the strikes and sunk the target. The B-2 previously demonstrated its striking power during Operation Midnight Hammer, which saw Iranian nuclear development facilities destroyed.

“This test is a clear example of how we work with trusted allies to bring new capabilities into play faster and smarter,” U.S. Air Force Col. Scott Gunn, 53rd Wing commander, said in a service release. “We’re not just preparing for tomorrow; we’re shaping it together.”

The test comes at a time when the Arctic is becoming an increasingly contested environment, in addition to China attempting to assert maritime dominance through a series of naval provocations, including with a series of recent incursions into U.S. Arctic territory.

“The exercise demonstrated how Norwegian and American air power can work together seamlessly to engage targets at sea under realistic conditions,” Finberg said.

“This contributes to increased collective security and deterrence against future attacks against Norway and the Nordic region.” ■

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YOUR AIR FORCE

SECOND B-21 FLIES FOR FIRST TIME AS AIR FORCE EYES TESTING EXPANSION

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

The U.S. Air Force in September announced its second B-21 Raider flew to Edwards Air Force Base in California, expanding the service's capabilities to test the next-generation stealth bomber.

With two B-21s now at Edwards, the Air Force said it can move into more advanced phases of testing, covering weapons integration and critical mission systems. Until now, B-21 testing has primarily focused on initial flight performance checks.

"With the arrival of the second B-21 Raider, our flight test campaign gains substantial momentum," Air Force Secretary Troy Meink said. "We can now expedite critical evaluations of mission systems and weapons capabilities, directly supporting the strategic deterrence and combat effectiveness envisioned for this aircraft."

The B-21, which manufacturer Northrop Grumman touts as the world's first sixth-generation aircraft, will be capable of carrying both nuclear and conventional weapons, and its advanced stealth is meant to allow it to carry out penetrating strike missions in enemy territory.

The bomber, named in honor of the Doolittle Raiders of World War II, is intended to replace the aging B-1B Lancer and B-2A Spirit bombers. Eventually, the Air Force plans to fly a two-bomber force comprised of at least 100 B-21s and 76 revamped B-52J Stratofortresses.

The Air Force and Northrop Grumman unveiled the first B-21 at a plant in Palmdale, California, in December 2022. Nearly a year later, in November 2023, that first bomber flew to Edwards, while Northrop continued work building additional B-21s under a low-rate initial production process.

Having two B-21s at Edwards will also give B-21 maintainers more hands-on experience with the bombers, the Air Force said.

Maintenance training will include managing simultaneous repairs and sustainment operations, testing how effective maintenance tools are, learning how to use its technical data and becoming familiar with logistical processes.

This will help the Air Force more quickly get the B-21 to a point where it can be used in normal operations, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin said.

"The addition of a second B-21 to the flight test program accelerates the path to fielding," Allvin said. "By having more assets in the test environment, we bring this capability to our warfighters faster, demonstrating the urgency with which we're tackling modernization."

The Air Force also said that in fiscal 2026 it will launch major construction projects at all three of the B-21's designated operating bases: Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota, Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri and Dyess Air Force Base in Texas.

"The B-21 Raider program represents a cornerstone of our strategic nuclear modernization," Allvin said. "The concurrent efforts in testing, sustainment preparation, and infrastructure investments clearly illustrate our commitment to providing unmatched capabilities to deter and defeat threats well into the future." ■

A second B-21 Raider test aircraft takes off from Palmdale, California, to join the Air Force's flight test campaign at Edwards Air Force Base.

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PENTAGON CUTS BACK F-35 UPGRADES TO SLOW SCHEDULE SLIPS: AUDITORS

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program is scaling back its ambitions for a slate of upgrades called Block 4, the Government Accountability Office announced in September, as the aircraft struggles with production delays, cost overruns and supply chain snarls.

The downgrading of plans for F-35 upgrades, revealed in GAO's report "F-35 Program: Actions Needed to Address Late Deliveries and Improve Future Development," is the latest challenge for the vital — as well as troubled and expensive — program.

"The F-35 remains critical to our national defense, as well as that of our partners and allies, and is expected to retain critical roles for decades to come," the report said. "After nearly 20 years of aircraft production, however, the F-35 program continues to overpromise and underdeliver."

Block 4 is meant to boost the Lockheed Martin-made jet's weapons capabilities, sensors and sensor fusion, and comes on the heels of another upgrade known as Technology Refresh 3, or TR-3. However, Block 4 is now at least $6 billion over budget and years behind schedule, in part due to delays with TR-3.

The F-35 program originally aimed to have Block 4's 66 capabilities — which later swelled by more than a dozen — completed by 2026, but that deadline first slipped to 2029 and then further. A 2024 Defense Department review found the program was not on pace to start delivering the bulk of Block 4 upgrades until the mid-2030s, partly due to technical challenges, according to GAO.

Program officials then decided to focus on Block 4 capabilities that could be delivered by 2031 at the earliest — still at least six years behind schedule — and that wouldn't require the additional power and cooling capacity of a planned engine upgrade. Block 4 is still on track to deliver improved electronic warfare, weapons, communication and navigation capabilities, GAO said, but a more detailed list was not available to auditors. Some capabilities, including those that depend on the improved engine, will be delayed, and others struck entirely because they are no longer needed, the report said.

GAO said program officials acknowledged the new plan for Block 4 doesn't meet its original intent, but that the revised version could be realistically achieved within new cost, schedule and performance goals, and allow capabilities to be delivered at a more predictable pace.

A 2021 estimate also found Block 4 costs had grown from the original $10.6 billion to $16.5 billion; an updated estimate won't be ready until the end of 2025.

In a statement to Defense News, Lockheed Martin stood by its work on the F-35 and pledged to keep moving forward on Block 4.

"The F-35 is combat proven, offers the most advanced capability and technology, and is the most affordable option to ensure America and its allies remain ahead of emerging threats," Lockheed Martin said. "In partnership with the F-35 Joint Program Office, we will deliver 170 [to] 190 F-35s this year and continue fielding Block 4 capabilities to ensure the F-35 maintains its unmatched dominance in the skies."

The GAO report also raised other concerns about the F-35 program, including rising costs and ongoing production delays.

The F-35's acquisition costs — which include development and procurement — have grown to more than $485 billion, as of December 2023. That's a nearly 10% increase from the December 2022 estimate of $442 billion, and more than double its original baseline cost from 2001.

Those costs are also $89.5 billion more than the rebaselining that was done in 2012. The F-35's lifetime cost, including

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A1C ELI ROSE/AIR FORCE

The F-35 program is delaying some of its planned Block 4 upgrades as it focuses on delivering capabilities as early as 2031.

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Airman 1st Class James Meredith applies precision tape on an F-35A Lightning II at RAF Lakenheath, United Kingdom, March 20.

SRA SELEENA MUHAMMAD-ALI/AIR FORCE

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sustainment costs, is more than $2 trillion.

The F-35's engine will also have to work harder to produce the level of power and cooling capacity the jet's Block 4 upgrades will require, GAO said. This will result in more wear and tear on the engine, accounting for $38 billion of the program's lifecycle cost estimate growth.

Lockheed is also still behind schedule on the TR-3 hardware and software that will make Block 4 possible. The company now expects to begin delivering those TR-3 elements in 2026, about three years after its original goal. Those delays were caused by problems maturing its integrated core processor and stabilizing its software so that TR-3 reliably starts up.

The TR-3 delays in 2023 led to the Pentagon ordering a halt, which ultimately lasted a year, to F-35 deliveries. Lockheed ended up storing dozens of new jets, which were slated to have TR-3, at locations such as its Fort Worth, Texas, facility as it scrambled to get TR-3 working.

Ultimately, Lockheed managed to get an interim version of the software working well enough for the Pentagon to begin accepting the jets, even though they were unable to fly in combat. This was done in part to avoid the risk of having more than 100 high-value F-35s parked together.

However, the TR-3 problem has worsened Lockheed's years-long issue with delivery delays. In 2024, all 110 F-35s the company delivered were delivered late, with an average delay of 238 days behind schedule. That is far below where the company was in 2021, when it delivered 22 of its 142 aircraft late, with an average delay of 16 days behind schedule.

As of May, Lockheed was still working to deliver 20 remaining aircraft that were meant to be delivered in 2024.

Parts shortages have also contributed to F-35 delays, GAO said. This February, program officials said, Lockheed had 52 in-the-works jets that had to be taken off the production line and temporarily stored because necessary parts were so late.

That month, there were more than 4,000 parts shortages in the final stage of the production line, twice the historic average, according to the Defense Contract Management Agency. More than 1,600 of those parts are required for TR-3 hardware, the report said. And the flap on the front of the F-35's wings is one of the main parts driving production delays over the last two years, GAO said.

DCMA officials told auditors that Lockheed has plans it hopes will fix the parts shortages, such as working with suppliers to more quickly identify risks to the supply chain. However, even with those plans, GAO said, parts delays and shortages will continue to delay deliveries through the rest of 2025.

GAO also noted that even when Lockheed delivers aircraft up to 60 days late, it still is able to receive partial incentive fees, which can total hundreds of millions of dollars. Auditors advised the Pentagon to rethink its use of those fees to avoid rewarding late deliveries.

RTX subsidiary Pratt & Whitney also failed to deliver any of the jet's F-35 engines on time in 2023 and 2024, the report said. And last year, GAO said, those engines were 155 days late on average.

DCMA has repeatedly urged Pratt to speed up its engine deliveries, so far without success, GAO said. However, those engine delays haven't affected aircraft production, auditors said.

The F-35 Joint Program Office and Pratt & Whitney did not respond to requests for comment by the time of this story's publication. ■

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FLIGHT TESTS BEGIN ON US AIR FORCE'S NEW 'DOOMSDAY PLANE'

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Sierra Nevada Corp. plans to turn five Boeing 747-8 aircraft into a fleet of SAOC planes.

SIERRA NEVADA CORP.

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

The Air Force and aerospace firm Sierra Nevada Corp. have started flight tests on the service's next-generation "doomsday plane."

Flight tests for the E-4C Survivable Airborne Operations Control, or SAOC, are being held at the Aviation Innovation and Technology Center in Dayton, Ohio, the company said in a release.

Sierra Nevada, also known as SNC, carried out the SAOC's first flight on Aug. 7 as part of the program's engineering and manufacturing development process. Flight and ground testing will continue into 2026, primarily in Dayton, Ohio, and Wichita, Kansas, the company said.

SAOC is meant to serve as an airborne command-and-control center that would be used in the most catastrophic circumstances. In the event of a nuclear war or other widespread calamity that destroys or disrupts most military command centers, the SAOC would allow the president to direct U.S. forces and relay orders from the air.

The Air Force in 2024 awarded SNC a $13 billion contract to build five SAOC aircraft to replace the Air Force's aging fleet of four E-4B Nightwatch planes. Sierra Nevada is expected to finish the work by July 2036.

Sierra Nevada said these flight tests are meant to help reduce risks early in SAOC's development process by identifying problems before they become worse down the line and cause delays.

The planes are being built from heavily modified Boeing 747-8 aircraft. Sierra Nevada is hardening the planes to protect against radiation and electromagnetic pulses, as well as adding communication antennas, computers and mission systems.

The first 747-8 earmarked for SAOC arrived at Sierra Nevada's innovation and technology center at Dayton International Airport in June 2024, about a month and a half after the contract was awarded. Three more 747-8s have followed, with the fourth having arrived in April 2025.

Sierra Nevada plans to use a modular open system approach, with modern secure communication systems, to build SAOC

The SAOC deal is Sierra Nevada's largest single contract in its six-decade history, and the company hopes it will lead to more big-ticket opportunities.

Sierra Nevada is expanding for this work as well. In October 2024, the company opened a second hangar to convert a 747 into SAOC at the Dayton airport and broke ground on two more hangars there. The first of those new hangars is expected to be finished and open for operations in October 2025, the company said.

The current fleet of E-4Bs, officially called the National Airborne Operations Center, is more than half a century old and the planes are near the end of their service lives. ■

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AIR FORCE MAY KEEP MINUTEMAN III NUKES IN OPERATION UNTIL 2050, REPORT SAYS

Dwindling spare parts and potentially deteriorating elements could post operational challenges.

U.S. AIR FORCE

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

The Air Force may be forced to keep operating its already half-century-old Minuteman III nuclear missiles until 2050, as the replacement Sentinel program continues to run into delays, government auditors.

The service had previously expected the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile to reach the end of its service in 2036, the Government Accountability Office said in its report, "ICBM Modernization: Air Force Actions Needed to Expeditiously Address Critical Risks to Sentinel Transition."

But in the four years since that assessment was made, the LGM-35A Sentinel program has run into a series of developmental snags and severe projected cost overruns.

Minuteman III currently makes up the land-based portion of the nation's nuclear triad, with 400 missiles deployed across roughly 450 silos in Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, Colorado and Nebraska.

Those missiles are now at least half a century old and their time is running out, prompting the Air Force to contract with Northrop Grumman in 2020 to build the Sentinel successor. That program was originally expected to cost $77.7 billion.

That estimate proved to be wildly optimistic, and projected future costs of Sentinel began to spiral. GAO said that the Pentagon concluded an unrealistic delivery schedule, ineffective systems engineering, incomplete basic system design and an atrophied ICBM industrial base all caused the cost overruns.

In January 2024, Sentinel's cost overruns led the government to declare a Nunn-McCurdy breach and a restructuring of the program. The Pentagon said in July 2024 that Sentinel was on a path to costing $160 billion. But even a restructured program will still cost at least $140 billion — roughly 81% higher than the original cost estimate.

Sentinel was originally expected to reach initial operational capability in 2029, but is now slipping years behind schedule as problems emerge. Earlier this spring, for example, the Air Force confirmed it will have to dig entirely new silos for the Sentinel missiles, because the existing Minuteman III silos are not in good enough shape to reuse.

NO REST FOR MINUTEMAN III

In the face of those delays, GAO said, the Air Force's Minuteman III program office took another look at the program and concluded it is feasible to keep it running for 25 more years.

But doing so will not be easy. Minuteman IIIs were first deployed at hundreds of Air Force silos across the Plains region in the early 1970s, and at the time, they were expected to be operational for about a decade. If they stay in operation until about 2050, they will have a service life of at least 75 years.

That will present multiple sustainment challenges, as obsolete spare parts dwindle and components such as diodes, resisters and capacitors deteriorate, GAO said. And as spare parts supplies diminish, the report said, it will be harder to conduct Minuteman III's flight tests.

The Air Force regularly conducts test flights of unarmed Minuteman III missiles several times a year to ensure they stay reliable and accurate, as well as demonstrating the United States' nuclear deterrent to nations around the world.

The Air Force was already considering extending Minuteman III test launches past 2030, GAO said. However, with the ICBMs possibly staying online until 2050, those flight tests could continue through 2045. To conserve spare parts for flight tests, GAO said, the Air Force has received permission to conduct fewer tests annually.

Minuteman IIIs also could be converted to a multiple-warhead configuration to help alleviate the problems from Sentinel's delays in the meantime, the report said. Today's ICBMs now hold one nuclear warhead each.

But under a MIRV, or Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle, configuration, the missiles could carry up to three nuclear warheads. This would allow a single Minuteman III to strike more targets and maintain the program's deterrent effect, even if the overall number of missiles goes down.

GAO said Air Force Global Strike Command, which oversees the nation's ICBM force, would be able to switch Minuteman IIIs to MIRV configuration. But it would require a policy change from the government, Global Strike told GAO, and the command's leadership prefers to have as much lead time as possible to carry out such a logistically complex project.

GAO advised the Air Force to prepare a report on the risks associated with transitioning from Minuteman III to Sentinel, outlining how it will address the sustainment risks of operating the older ICBMs for years longer than expected. The Air Force should also consider the personnel and materiel implications of switching Minuteman III ICBMs to a MIRV configuration, if that choice is made, GAO said.

The Air Force agreed with GAO's recommendations. ■

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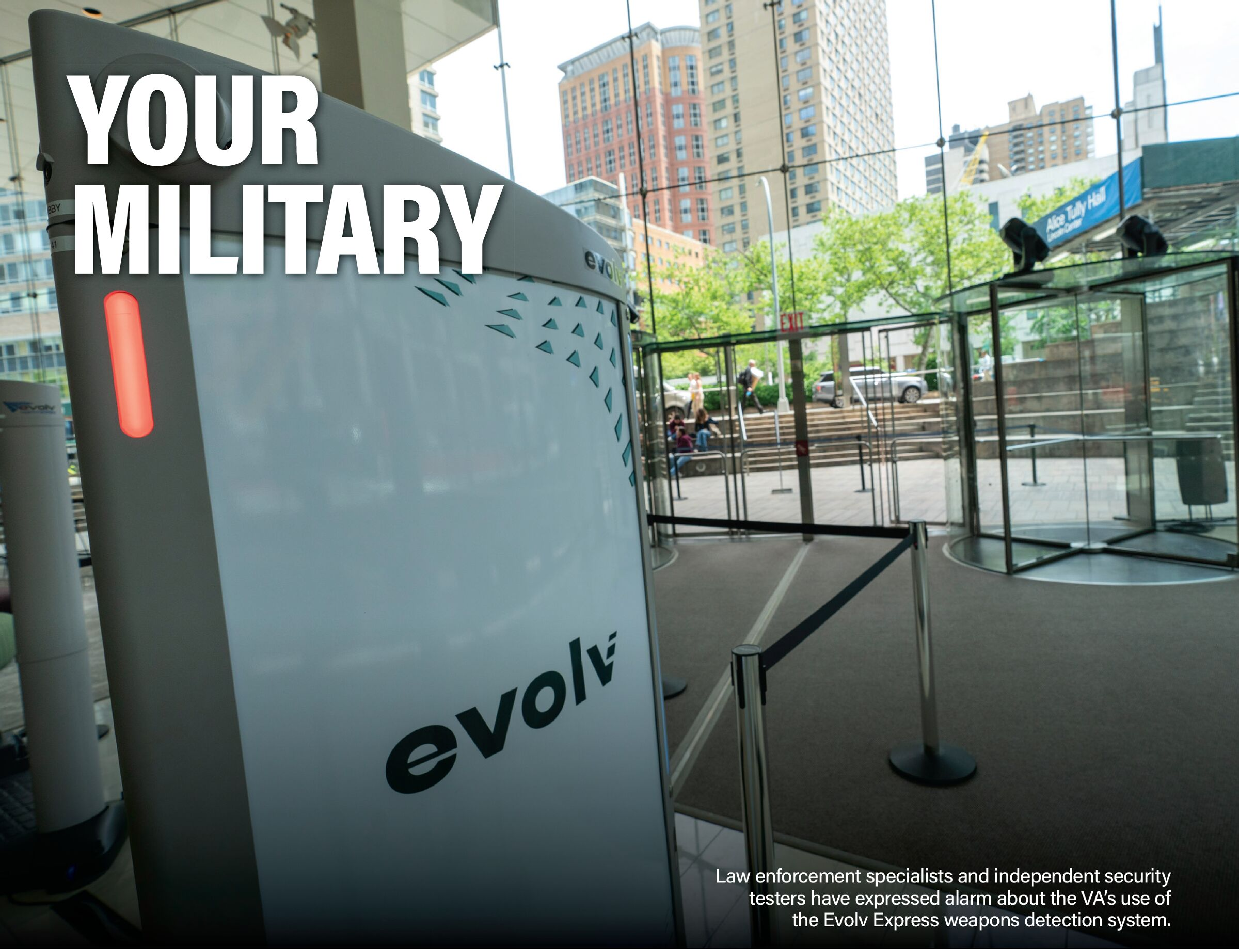

Law enforcement specialists and independent security testers have expressed alarm about the VA's use of the Evolv Express weapons detection system.

MARY ALTAFFER/AP

VA HOSPITALS PAY FOR AI WEAPONS SCANNERS TESTERS SAY ARE ERROR-PRONE

BY ALIYA STERNSTEIN

Veterans' hospitals short on police guards have turned to a purported artificial intelligence-based weapons scanner with advertised features that offered an artificial sense of security compared to the actual capabilities of conventional metal detectors that cost about 25 times less, according to the Federal Trade Commission.

The Department of Veterans Affairs continues to pay a subscription — now valued at $372,000 — for the Evolv Express system in Buffalo, New York, and has plans to roll out more machines.

This summer, the department signed a contract worth up to $1 million for the installation of a different AI weapon-detection tool with similar advertising, federal databases and contracting papers show.

The VA's inventory of AI uses acknowledges that the department operates and maintains the system.

The department's interest in Express, meanwhile, has alarmed some law enforcement specialists and independent security testers.

"It is particularly problematic, given this is a federal agency, buying a federally-sanctioned product, and this is supposed to be put in hospitals, specifically to guard against active shooters and vets who might want to hurt themselves in the hospital," said Jim Bueermann, a retired police chief who leads the Future Policing Institute, a nonprofit that helps law enforcement agencies use AI responsibly.

"We use scientific methods to test" security devices, "not the marketing material from the company that intends to make money off the sale of that system."

When the VA contracted for detectors at the Buffalo VA Medical Center in August 2023, the Express webpage explained the device uses "proven artificial intelligence" to ensure "more accurate threat detection" than metal detectors and "a line-free experience without slowing down."

Also at that time, the homepage of Evolv

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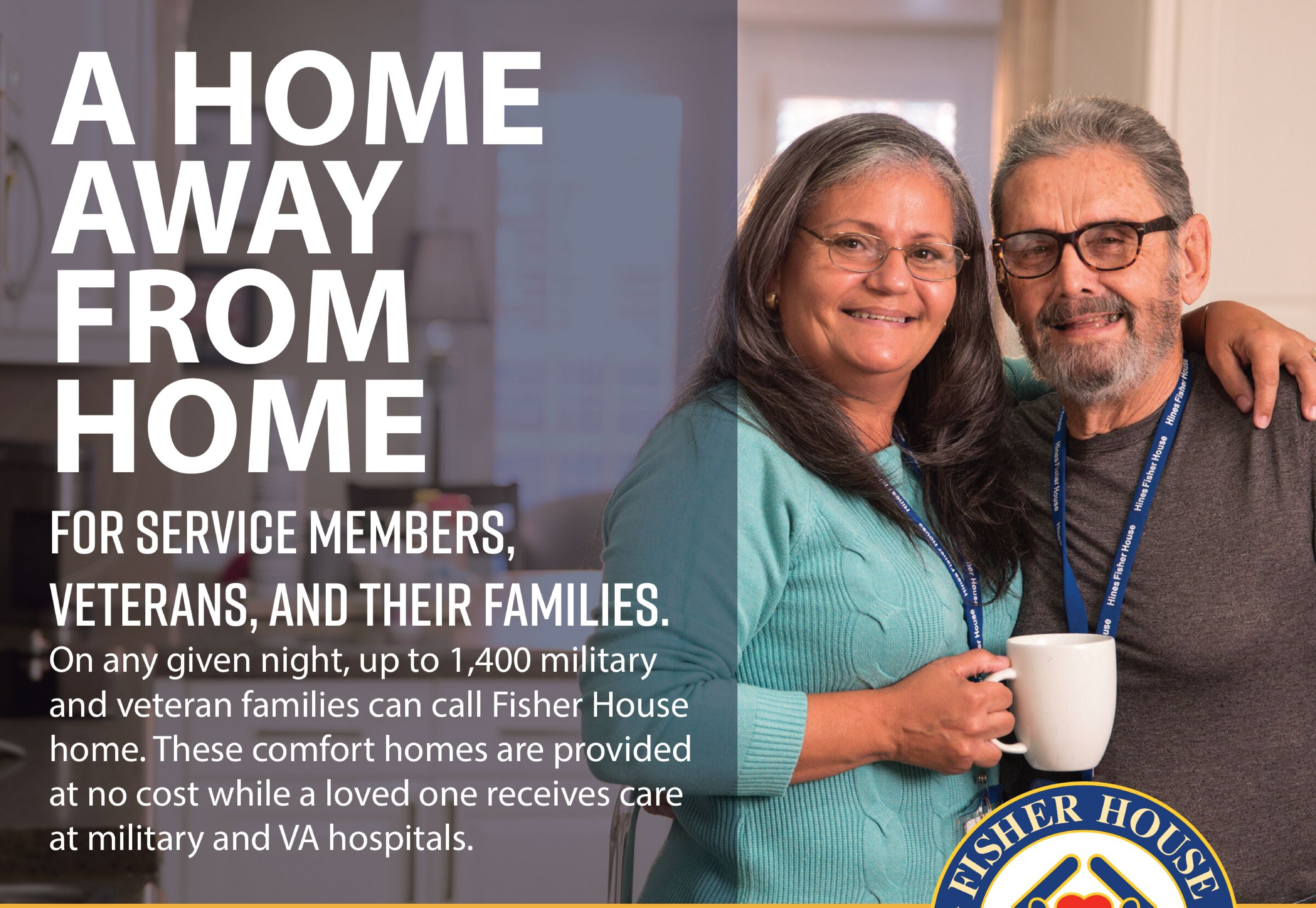

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LANE2
S33097_03
Dismiss All
Pending | 2 Alerts
S33097_03
S33096_03
evolv
Dismiss Alert
evolv
technology

The Evolv Express weapons detection system flags a weapon during a system demonstration, May 2022.

MARY ALTAFFER/AP

Technologies, the machine's maker, touted that Express screens "in a touchless manner," which "drastically reduces human errors by security guards."

Additionally, Evolv's "Virtual Demo" webpage declared that Express will "reduce labor costs by up to 70%."

The Federal Trade Commission filed a lawsuit in 2024, describing each of those performance claims as false, misleading or unsubstantiated. Nearly one year later, the company has not released independent, third-party tests to validate its claims.

In addition to the FTC case, three shareholder lawsuits accuse Evolv of marketing a system that fails to detect certain knives, guns and bombs, and raises alarms over harmless items as an AI alternative to traditional metal detectors.

Express actually employs common electromagnetic sensing, and not AI, to detect objects — and only metallic ones, the FTC complaint states.

Before the FTC took action, Evolv claimed that its AI can classify an object as either bad or benign by comparing the "metallic composition, shape, fragmentation," and other traits that the sensing detects with the known traits, or "signatures," of all weapons.

VA hospitals are not the only federally-funded buildings that display the $1 billion firm's sleek, white archways. The U.S. government has agreed to pay roughly $4 million for various Express installations at schools and museums, including the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

Currently, security system vendors CEIA and Garrett Electronics lead the metal-detector market in the federal sector, with comparable walk-through machines for entrances costing less than $15,000.

A Chicago VA hospital inked a four-year deal this summer worth up to $1.3 million to launch a newer "AI-powered weapon detection system," called Xtract One SmartGateway, with advertised "touchless" and "non-invasive" performance features that, some independent testers say, have not been validated.

In response to questions about the concerns regarding these systems, VA Press Secretary Pete Kasperowicz said in an emailed statement, "VA employs a wide range of robust security measures to keep veterans, employees, and our facilities safe. To prevent circumvention of security measures, VA does not disclose protective techniques."

Evolv Technologies did not provide a comment in response to concerns about the VA's or other federal agencies' specific purchases or uses of Express.

In an emailed statement, Evolv Chief Marketing Officer Alexandra Smith Ozerkis said, "We stand behind our technology."

Across all industries, "roughly half of contracts that are up for renewal this year have already been renewed. These are customers that have deployed our technology, seen it work in real-world environments, and are choosing to renew and/or expand their investment," Ozerkis said.

Evolv shares external testing results with prospective customers, Ozerkis added by email, declining to provide a copy.

VA'S 'TOUCHLESS' WEAPONS SCANNER NEEDS MORE THAN TWO HANDS

The number of objects that Express can detect depends on the sensitivity level a user sets.

Security researchers explained that the higher levels require more staff supervision to triage false alarms involving laptops, canes or other harmless items, while the lower levels allow in more entrants — and some guns or umbrellas they are packing, unless staff manually check bags.

"For both of these approaches, you'll still have to have human guards," said Nikita Ermolaev, a senior research engineer at IPVM, an independent firm that tests and rates physical security tools.

Security staff are in increasingly short supply at the VA. Under former President Joe Biden's administration last August, the VA inspector general identified police officer shortages as among the top five reported staffing gaps across VA hospitals.

That count emerged before current President Donald Trump's administration announced plans to further slash 30,000 department employees by the end of September.

"At a hospital that is low on staff, Express can be set to the lower sensitivity setting, which will have the hospital dealing with fewer false alarms, but they will also be missing more weapons. And that could create a false sense of security," Ermolaev warned.

While a proposed settlement with the FTC that admits no wrongdoing will ban

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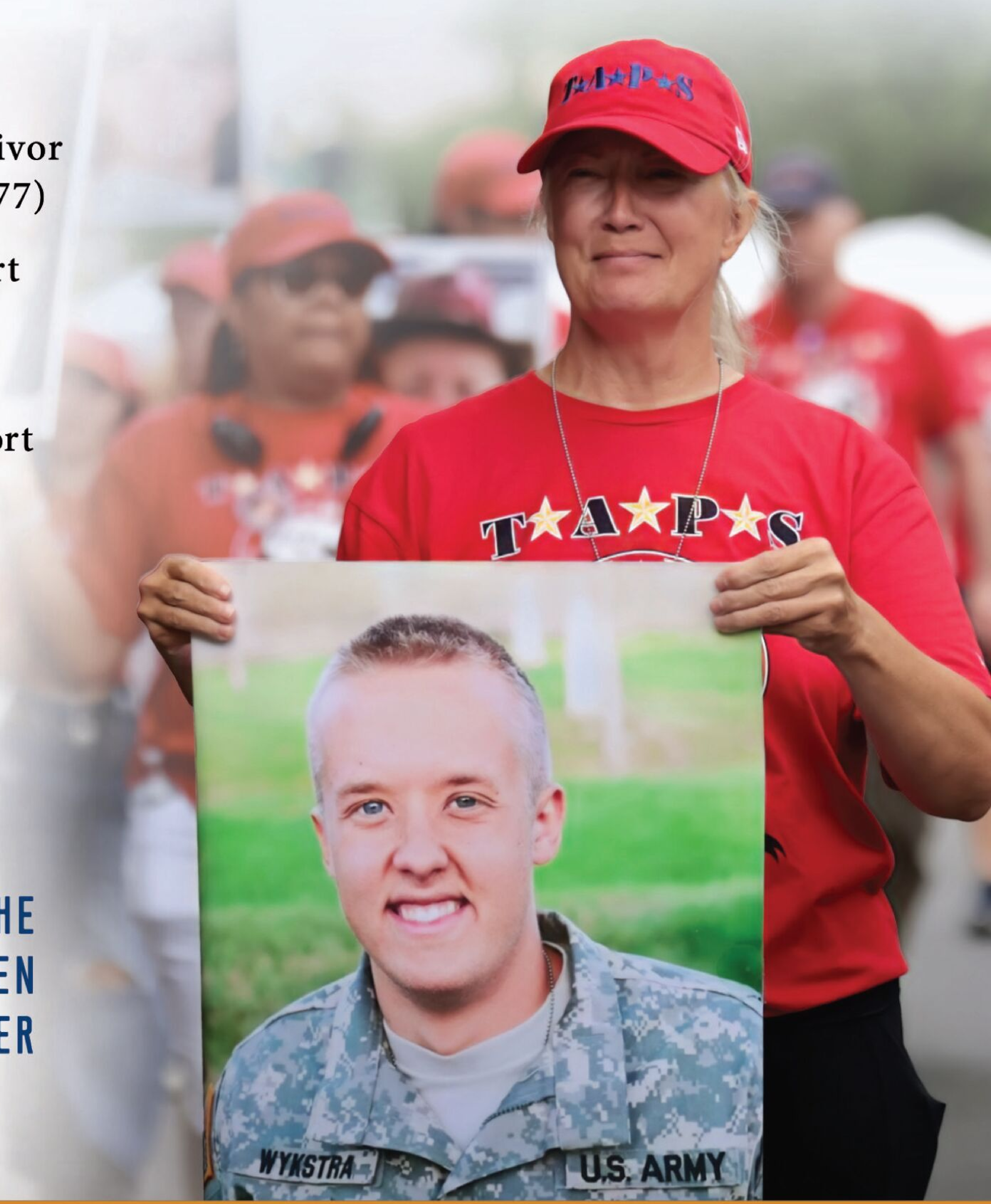

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Evolv from making unsupported claims about the technology's ability to use AI for weapons detection, product descriptions in the VA's purchasing plans still cite some of those assertions.

For example, VA Capitol Health Care Network procurement papers explain that Express's use of AI to detect threats will ensure that entrants "are not required to divest any of their personal items or stop and pose in any manner."

The documents also state, "Without this software and equipment, the potential exists for an insider threat/active shooter-based attack" within the Baltimore, West Virginia and Washington, D.C., medical centers.

Juliana Gruenwald Henderson, a deputy director at the FTC Office of Public Affairs, said in an email that the agency cannot comment on whether a company is complying with an FTC order.

The VA's attraction to Express's advertised AI capabilities may be part of a larger federal contracting problem, in which agencies refrain from questioning the inner workings of devices claiming to be high-tech, said Matthew Guariglia, a senior policy analyst at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit digital rights group.

"VA hospitals are clamoring for some way of preventing any gun violence, which is a very real concern," and to decide to "just throw technology at it is a shame," Guariglia said.

Federal purchasing decisions "are so often rarely about actual science and so much more about the relationship between the buyer and the marketing person or a specific company," he added.

Meanwhile, this spring, Chicago's Jesse Brown VA Medical Center — the site of a recent active shooter and a self-inflicted fatal shooting — issued a solicitation for a "concealed weapons detection system" with product requirements that resemble Express's advertised features.

The Chicago solicitation and the Capitol Health Care Network's purchase plans for Express both specify the need for "AI and advanced algorithms to differentiate between threats (guns, Improvised Explosives Devices etc.) and nonthreat items such as phones, keys, belt buckles etc.)," such that individuals "are not required to divest everyday items."

Xtract One, a smaller vendor that similarly claims to detect weapons while avoiding false alarms on harmless objects, ultimately won the work.

On Aug. 26, the VA initiated a four-year contract worth up to $1.3 million for the deployment of Xtract One's machinery at the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center.

IPVM's Ermolaev said that, similar to Express, "real-life performance remains to be seen" with Xtract One, as independent testing results remain unavailable.

Earlier this summer, Xtract One said in an emailed statement that nondisclosure agreements cover tests that other organizations conducted, and "therefore, we cannot provide those results."

"We believe that we have a strong solution to address the VA's requirements," the company added.

However, Ermolaev cautioned, "If you're looking to find a lot of concealed weapons, whether it's small, subcompact

AI *page 24*

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Marines enter the National Museum of the Marine Corps, just outside Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia, in 2014.

DVIDS

AI *page 22*

guns or knives, and you're low on people, it's a very difficult task to achieve with current state-of-the-art weapons detectors — and that goes beyond Express to their competitors — because the same fundamental trade-off applies," meaning the trade-off between spotting the most weapons and hands-free screening.

FALSE ALARMS AT DOJ-FUNDED SCHOOLS, USMC MUSEUM

Advertisements aimed at schools that portrayed Express as an answer to the trade-off between security and convenience caught the FTC's attention, according to the agency's complaint, particularly after a New York school district's scanners failed to detect a gun and knives, including a seven-inch one, that a student allegedly used to stab a peer in 2022.

The complaint explains that, the next year, Evolv offered a higher-sensitivity level and an acknowledgment: Schools may need more staff to run Express, as the machine may still miss some knives, trigger more false alarms and require the installation of a conveyor belt to divert harmless items.

By October 2023, the FTC had launched its investigation.

Not every school district or federal funding authority got word of the controversy. Officials at Colton Joint Unified School District in San Bernardino County, California, and Bristol City School District in Bristol, Tennessee, said via email that they were unaware of product-performance concerns when they applied for 2023 Department of Justice grants totaling $950,000 to purchase Express.

A federal spending database's summaries of the Express grants emphasize features — such as AI-based "touchless security screening" and "allow[ing] for many students to pass through while still detecting potential weapons in their possession" — that Express does not offer, according to the FTC and the schools.

For example, in Bristol City, three-ring binders triggered alarms, which initially prompted staff to inspect backpacks manually, school officials said. Now, students must place them, along with cellphone chargers and laptops, on a table before entering.

In response to questions and concerns, Justice Department spokesperson Sheryl Thomas said in an emailed statement that DOJ's Community Oriented Policing Services Office, which awards billions of dollars to state and local agencies, decided that funding the purchases of Express and other grantees' projects may "improve security at schools and on school grounds" as part of "evidence-based school safety programs."

Bristol City School District Superintendent David Scott, who was not in office at the time of the award, said by email, "I guess their marketing strategies had us convinced that the Evolv Express was the top tier."

Bristol City schools intentionally dial

the sensitivity “pretty high,” Scott noted. “We have added very expensive technology and still need to assign monitoring duties to two staff members per archway, one to watch the screen and one to be ready to accost someone who enters with a questionable object.”

Still, Scott pointed to real benefits, albeit ones also common to traditional metal detectors, such as displaying a commitment to security, keeping lines orderly and deterring students from smuggling in vape cartridges and other contraband.

Colton Joint Unified Communications Director Katie Orloff said by email that the school system has not finished ordering the machines and is aware of the ability to adjust the sensitivity level.

In addition to federally-funded hospitals and schools, several federal museums, among them the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Virginia, continue paying a premium for Express amid false alarms.

Staff at the Marine Corps museum said in an email that they were not aware of the FTC lawsuit until a reporter contacted the museum.

The museum sets its $350,390 Express system to “maximum sensitivity” to screen upwards of 150 people who attend the facility’s roughly 500 events each year — yielding “frequent false positives,” with the main culprits being umbrellas, phones or eyeglass cases, museum staff said.

Such false alarms can become a security threat themselves, according to researchers at the security and surveillance industry research group IPVM and the advocacy group Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (S.T.O.P.).

Earlier this year, when the alarm rate hit 50% at one of New York City’s top museums, where concealed umbrellas on a rainy day made Express “cry wolf,” guards did not respond to two-thirds of alerts, an IPVM-S.T.O.P. field study found.

Marine Corps museum officials, after witnessing a high false-alarm rate during installation, trained security staff to examine the location of any alert manually, museum staff said.

“Security protocols still include visual bag checks,” staff added. “No cost savings have been identified.”

The Marine Corps museum sees other advantages — including the aesthetics that Express contributes to the facility. Previously, the museum assigned a guard to the minute-long task of wanding attendees with handheld metal detectors. Now, Express’s visual display of the location of flagged threats handles the process in seconds, museum staff said.

“Unlike earlier screening methods that resembled TSA checkpoints, Evolv makes visitor entry smoother and more pleasant,” they added, referring to Transportation Security Administration stations at airports.

Some law enforcement consultants remain wary, noting that TSA, unlike Evolv, does not claim its imaging systems will find improvised explosive devices.

“Most assuredly, commercial airports have a complete X-ray system in place, and they still swab for explosives,” said Phillip Lukens, a recently retired police chief recognized for incorporating AI into operations.

“I’m not sure that I understand how this system is so innovative that it’s able to detect an explosive, based on sensors or algorithms, if it can’t detect chemical composition … It gives me pause.” ■

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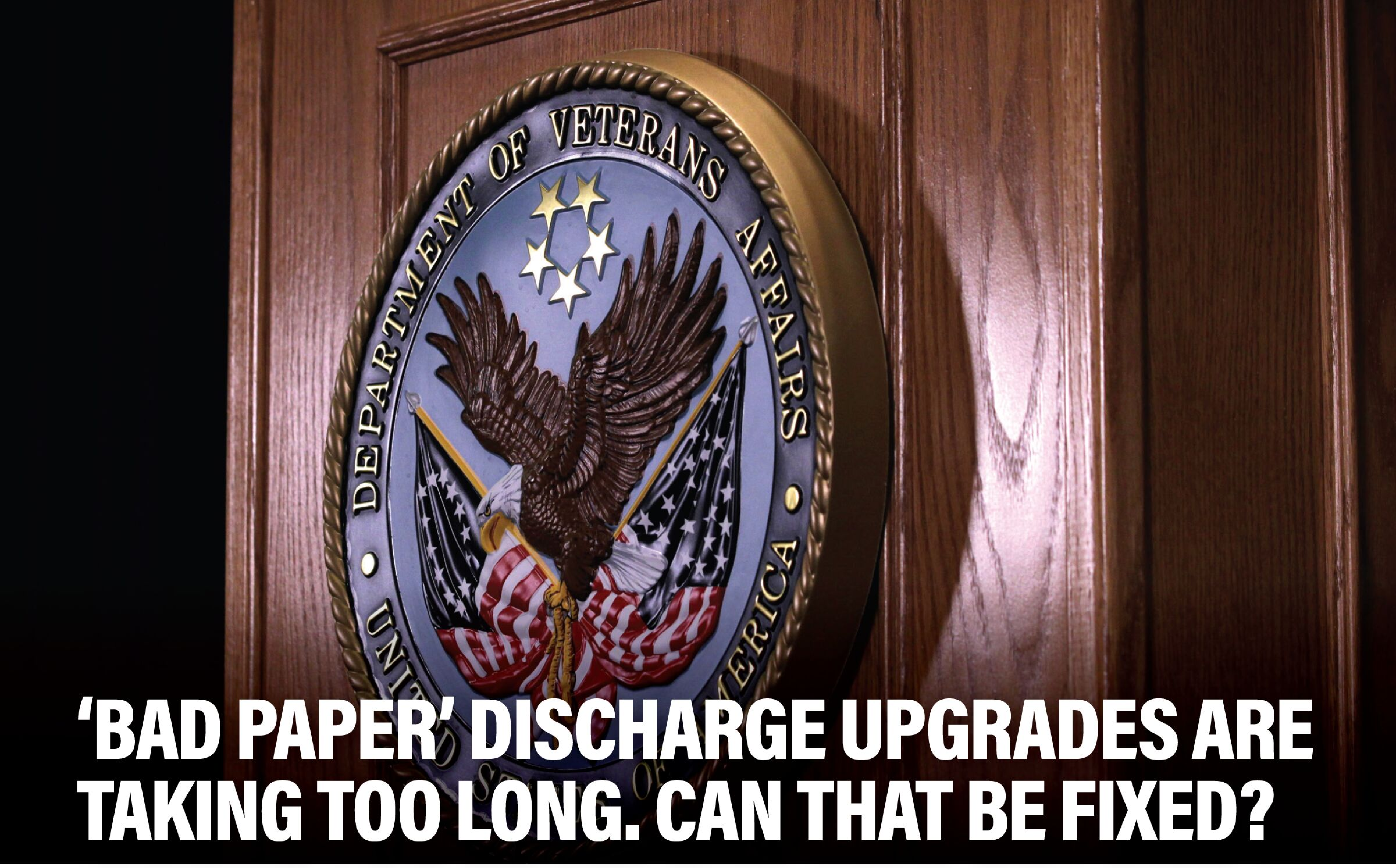
ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

‘BAD PAPER’ DISCHARGE UPGRADES ARE TAKING TOO LONG. CAN THAT BE FIXED?

BY HOPE HODGE SECK

It’s been more than a decade since Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel issued a 2014 memo calling for “liberal consideration” of discharge upgrade requests from veterans with symptoms of post-traumatic stress. But today, vets with discharges below honorable are still remaining in limbo for months or years, without access to full benefits of service and facing potential barriers to employment.

That’s according to a Government Accountability Office report published in July. The watchdog report, which evaluated nearly 22,000 cases eligible for liberal consideration that were closed between January 2018 and March 2024, found wild variance between the services in percentage of discharge requests granted, and similar inconsistencies in timeliness, with the Army in particular taking up to three years to adjudicate cases.

In fact, collected data shows, some timelines appear to be getting longer.

The Army Discharge Review Board took an average of 34 months to adjudicate liberal consideration cases in 2024, the longest turnaround time in the observation period. The shortest average review period for that board was 14 months in 2019.

The Naval Discharge Review Board had a top average of 16 months in 2023, up from a low of 11 months in 2018, 2019 and 2021.

The Air Force had the shortest adjudication times, ranging from four months in 2021 and 2022 to 11 months in 2019.

Outcomes were similarly varied. The Air Force had the lowest rates of full and partial upgrade grants and denial rates around 80% between its two upgrade evaluation boards.

The Navy was in the middle, fully granting 27% of requests before the Naval Discharge Review Board and 13% of those before the Board for Correction of Naval Records.

And the Army had the highest proportion of full grants, at 39% for the Army Discharge Review Board and 26% for the records correction board.

The GAO further found that boards responsible for deciding upgrades were inconsistent in explaining their decisions, and that the requirement to post documentation of upgrade decisions in a public online reading room was met less than half the time, limiting transparency.

And while the Defense Department concurred with some recommendations GAO made to increase transparency and introduce common standards across the department for consistency in decision-making, it pushed back on others, according to the watchdog.

Although the Defense Department agreed it should assess how the services’ post-separation review boards are applying the standard of liberal consideration, it called GAO’s recommendation to establish a single joint review board for all discharge requests premature, and said it would evaluate the impact of the proposal instead.

The department also disagreed with recommendations to establish timeframes, at the DOD and service levels, to adjudicate discharge upgrades and post current estimates of evaluation timeframes online.

“Litigation requirements and congressionally mandated reviews and associated processes have significantly tasked the Review boards,” officials wrote in a statement

DISCHARGE *page 28*

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DISCHARGE *page 26*

HEAL THE
WOUNDS
OF WAR
#FAIRNESS4VETS
VETERANS
WITH
PTSD

Veterans advocates rallied on Capitol Hill in 2016, urging lawmakers to deal with "bad paper" discharges.

STAFF

prepared by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense. "The Secretaries of the Military Departments require flexibility to allocate resources appropriately and ensure the most efficient overall processing across the review boards of all the matters subject to their review."

None of these findings surprise Kristofer Goldsmith. An Army veteran who was booted from the service with a general discharge after a suicide attempt linked to post-traumatic stress from his service in Iraq, during which he was tasked with photographing and documenting dead and mutilated bodies, Goldsmith began a campaign that would span nearly two decades to change the system not only for himself, but for other veterans whose service characterization was affected by their combat experiences.

Goldsmith finally received his own upgrade to an honorable discharge in 2019 — 12 years after he got out of the Army — having applied four times and been instrumental in passing a 2018 law codifying Hagel's liberal consideration memo.

Situations like his own are "extraordinarily common," Goldsmith told Military Times.

In fact, data from the Veterans Legal Clinic compiled in 2016 shows that 6.5% of veterans who served between 2002-2013, Goldsmith's era, were ineligible for benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs, dramatically up from 2.8% of Vietnam-era veterans and 1.7% of World War II vets.

"We were fighting unpopular wars for quite a while, and at the end of the day, commanders, even some of the best ones, are forced to look at their troops as numbers," Goldsmith said. "They have to get their units ready for deployments. When we were going through the Global War on Terror, where a unit would be one year on, one year off with deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, that meant there was no time for people to be rehabilitated, whether that was medically or … whether it's related to PTSD symptoms."

And yet, though changes like the Hagel memo and associated legislation are positive, along with broader awareness of the plight of vets with "bad paper" discharges who might struggle to gain access to needed VA health care or educational benefits to aid their transition to civilian life, Goldsmith sees little incentive for the Defense Department to help this population.

"Short of a PR crisis that affects recruiting, which this issue has never risen to, the DOD … will always look at it as dollars," Goldsmith said, noting that retroactive pay and benefits that come with discharge upgrades were an expense to the DOD that didn't deliver a concrete value in return.

Existing delays might in fact be exacerbated in coming months, said Rochelle Bobroff, director of the National Veterans Legal Services Program's pro bono arm, Lawyers Serving Warriors.

"I've seen three to four years to get a decision," Bobroff told Military Times, adding that amid personnel reductions at the Defense Department, processes seemed to be slowing down at every level. "I can't say whether things will get worse, but I don't expect things to get better."

Last year, Bobroff said, NVLSP assisted in about 200 discharge upgrade cases. This year, the organization is on track to help with about 200 more.

There are five military discharge characterizations below honorable, ranging from general to dishonorable; these characterizations affect the benefits for which a veteran is eligible, from vocational rehabilitation to health care.

Popping positive on a drug test for marijuana can result in a bad paper discharge, as can military-specific offenses like fraternization.

Sometimes, Bobroff said, NVLSP will encounter cases where military sexual trauma might be a cause for post-traumatic stress, but testimony or documentation of that trauma isn't considered as part of the upgrade case.

"We have some very strong cases where we feel liberal consideration has not been applied," she said. "We've taken some to court."

Goldsmith's advice for veterans seeking a discharge upgrade: don't even attempt it without enlisting a lawyer's help.

He also recommended that veterans prepare themselves for what can be a re-traumatizing experience in documenting and attesting to their experience as part of making their case.

Though he said he doubted it could be done, Goldsmith said he'd find it informative to track "metrics for a veteran's success" post-service and link them to the commander that veteran served under, creating a new incentive for leaders to invest in long-term success.

"If the Army, back in 2007 had looked at me and treated me differently and maybe focused on rehabilitation, physical and mental, you know, maybe I'd still be in the Army," he said. "Instead, I've spent the last 20 years talking about the cost of service that most other people don't talk about." ■

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LOUIS BRISCESE/AIR FORCE

EXPERTS DEBUNK DOD CLAIM ABOUT AUTISM THERAPY, DEMAND ITS AVAILABILITY

BY KAREN JOWERS

Defense Health Agency officials should formally authorize Applied Behavior Analysis, a widely recognized intervention to help children with autism, as a basic Tricare benefit, according to a report on the findings of a congressionally mandated independent study.

The report, conducted by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, debunks DHA officials' repeated assertion that ABA services don't meet their standards for reliable medical evidence.

The researchers lay out their analysis of why ABA meets Tricare's own standards, defined in law.

Researchers recommend this major shift in Tricare's policies for military family members diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, citing problems with an 11-year-old demonstration project that in effect limits the care available for these children.

"It's time for ABA to be a basic benefit in the Defense Health Agency," said Dr. Eric Flake, a retired Air Force colonel who is a member of the committee that conducted the study, during a Sept. 16 webinar.

Each month, about 1,000 military children receive diagnoses of autism, said Flake, who is adjunct faculty at the DOD Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrics Fellowship at Joint Base Lewis McChord, Washington, and an associate professor at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and the University of Washington.

The researchers, in their 310-page report released Sept. 9, recommend that DHA end its Autism Care Demonstration program, citing some policies that differ from clinical best practices and impose excessive administrative burdens on military families and ABA providers.

The policies limit providers' ability to target some skills essential to health and well-being, such as self-care tasks known as "activities of daily living." The policies also restrict providers from providing ABA services in schools and community settings.

While Tricare covers multiple services

for beneficiaries diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, ABA is specifically offered to military-connected families only through the demonstration program, which began in 2014.

Tricare doesn't authorize ABA services as a "basic benefit," meaning a covered service that is determined medically necessary as defined by law.

"Military families likely encounter more administrative barriers to accessing ABA services than civilian families," the researchers stated in their report. "Families expressed appreciation for ABA, but also reported stress and confusion about accessing care due to delays and complex requirements."

DOD CONSIDERS NATIONAL ACADEMIES REPORT

The committee also recommended DHA reduce administrative barriers that limit families' access to ABA services. Families often express concern that the current policies related to ABA are discriminatory.

Autism is the only diagnosis for which family members are required to enroll in the Exceptional Family Member Program and Extended Care Health Option (ECHO) in order to get access to medically recommended care, committee member Jennifer Penhale, an active-duty Air Force spouse and mother to three teenagers with autism, said during the webinar. Penhale chairs the Colorado Developmental Disabilities Council.

The research committee noted that ABA is now standard practice for many autistic individuals across public and private health systems. Since 2019, all states have adopted laws or issued regulatory guidance requiring certain commercial health plans to cover ABA services for people with autism, they reported.

The two-year study found that in spite of defense health officials' repeated assertions that Applied Behavior Analysis services don't meet DOD's standards for reliable medical evidence, ABA does in fact meet DOD's own standards.

Yet in their most recent report to Congress, dated Aug. 19, Defense Health Agency officials stated, "As of now, ABA services do not meet the Tricare hierarchy of reliable evidence standard for proven medical care."

The Defense Health Agency is reviewing the entire National Academies report, including the recommendations, "to determine our way forward with the Autism Care Demonstration," officials said in response to questions from Military Times. "Until this review is completed, the Department will continue to provide the services available under the ACD."

RECOMMENDATIONS REMOVE 'A LOT OF BARRIERS'

Dr. Kristi Cabiao, CEO and president of Mission Alpha Advocacy, an organization that advocates for military families within the Exceptional Family Member Program, praised the National Academies committee for its extensive work.

"Here you have this expert committee that says by DOD's own standards of reliable medical evidence, it's been met," Cabiao, the wife of an Air Force retiree and mother of a child with autism, told Military Times.

"The concern is, military families have spent at least 10 years in a demonstration. That's time that these families will never get back. They had to receive a lower quality ABA services because of really poor policies."

The National Academies study included

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a comprehensive review of empirical literature, an analysis of Tricare claims data from 2018 to 2023, an evaluation of policies and procedures and input from military families, researchers and ABA providers.

The committee included experts in behavior analysis, child development, public health, psychology, health services, biostatistics and autism research.

The researchers' recommendation that DHA formally authorize ABA as a Tricare basic benefit "is the most important recommendation for military families," said Cabiao. "It removes a lot of barriers."

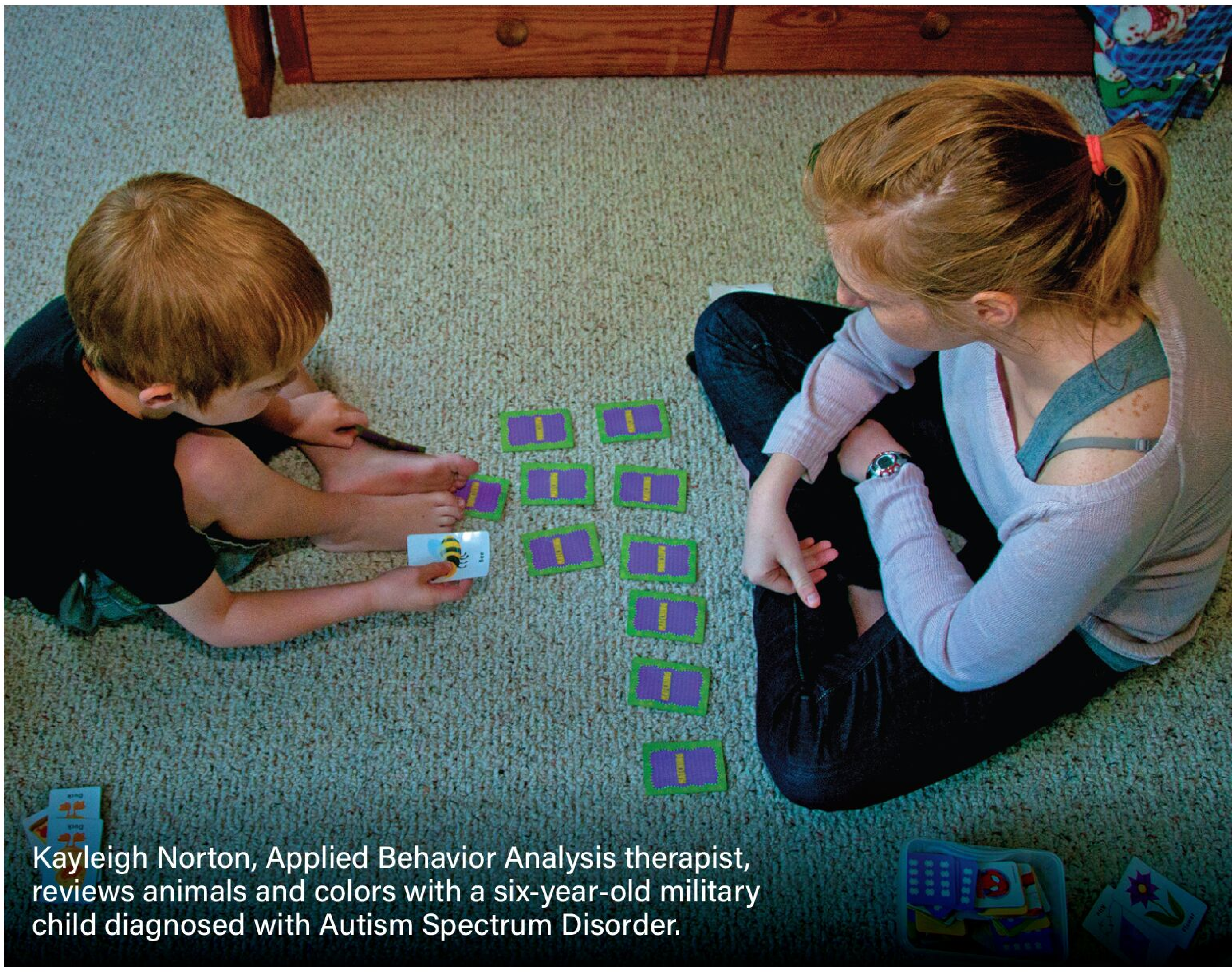
For example, active-duty families would no longer be mandated to enroll in EFMP and ECHO, she said. "We have families who weren't able to start ABA services right away, having delays of months because of this administrative burden."

Cementing ABA as a Tricare benefit would also eliminate the worry of a looming 2028 deadline, when the ABA demonstration program is scheduled to end.

"When you're depending on this really life-saving service, as it was for my child ... to know that in 2028 it might continue or it might not, or may be even more restricted, you don't have security in what the future holds," Cabiao said.

Aspects of the military lifestyle, such as frequent moves and caregiver deployments, can disrupt the stability children with autism need in their care.

One military parent told researchers there's a two-year waitlist just to be evaluated in El Paso, Texas, "which is absurd for those families that have to change duty stations frequently. This means they will never get the chance to be seen," the parent is quoted as saying in the report.



Kayleigh Norton, Applied Behavior Analysis therapist, reviews animals and colors with a six-year-old military child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

SENIOR AIRMAN DENNIS SLOAN/U.S. AIR FORCE

AUTISM RATES AMONG MILITARY CHILDREN

In DHA's annual report to Congress dated Aug. 19, officials said that in fiscal 2023, there were 16,747 beneficiaries with diagnoses of autism participating in the demonstration program, at a cost of $435 million. The average paid cost per participant was $25,948.

While it's difficult to compare the prevalence of autism between the military community and the general population, the National Academies researchers cited one recent review that identified 1 in every 28 military children, or 3.5%, as being diagnosed with autism in the period from 2019 to 2023.

That rate is slightly higher than the rate in the general population of 1 in 31 children with autism diagnoses, or 3.2%, in 2022, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Cabiao cautions against reading too much into the 0.3% gap between military and civilian populations, stating the difference is minimal and could be partly explained by the consistent system of medical records that keep track of military children's health care.

Still, she said, "One in 28 is a big number. It clearly demonstrates a readiness and retention issue if we don't provide quality ABA services."

During the six-year period from calendar years 2018 to 2023, there were 109,073 children ages 1 to 18 with an autism diagnosis who were eligible for Tricare benefits, according to the committee's report.

During that time, about one-third of those children had a claim for ABA services. More than half were under age 6, and 89% were under age 12. About four out of five beneficiaries participating in the demonstration are male.

'NEW TERRITORY' FOR THE DOD

Other recommendations included in the committee's report are: aligning Tricare coverage of ABA with clinical best practices; eliminating mandatory assessments that don't support treatment planning; and establishing an independent advisory council to help guide the transition. Along with many other experts, military families receiving ABA and military family advocacy organizations would be included on the advisory council.

Flake, the retired colonel who sits on the committee, highlighted DHA's "continued desire to see best practices come forward" in the field of autism treatment over the years.

He noted that many of the recommendations the committee made for DHA to transition from its demonstration program are already put into practice as standard care in other locations.

"We recognize that we may be going into some new territory for DHA, but that also isn't new for us as a military community," Flake said. "I have full confidence that with the support of the ABA community, with the support of families and parents, as well as policymakers and guidance from the recommendations of this report, that it can be a relatively smooth transition." ■

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A Sept. 17 memo signed by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth directs the "formal disestablishment" of DACOWITS.

ANNA MONEYMAKER/GETTY IMAGES

HEGSETH TERMINATES WOMEN'S ADVISORY GROUP, SLAMS 'DIVISIVE AGENDA'

BY HOPE HODGE SECK

The Pentagon has announced plans to terminate a 75-year-old advisory committee serving female service members, citing a "divisive" and harmful agenda — days after a previous memo established plans for reactivating it.

A Sept. 17 memo signed by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and reviewed by Military Times directs the "formal disestablishment" of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services.

"After further review, I have determined that the reinstatement of the Defense Advisory Committee for Women in the Services (DACOWITS) should not proceed," Hegseth wrote in the memo, addressed to the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness and the director of administration and management. "The Department's Advisory Committee Management Officer will terminate the DACOWITS in accordance with the requirements of [the Federal Advisory Committee Act]. In addition, the DACOWITS Sponsor will take appropriate action to realign resources associated with the DACOWITS, such as the reassignment of personnel, conclusion of contracts, and the archiving of DACOWITS' records."

A Sept. 8 memo also signed by Hegseth and reviewed by Military Times had directed the phased return to service of DACOWITS and 39 other advisory groups placed on hiatus, including the women's advisory committee that an internal email had previously recommended for closure.

The Pentagon did not respond to a request for comment in early September about the move to keep the committee. But on Sept. 23, officials provided a statement about Hegseth's termination decision that called DACOWITS "divisive" and criticized its "agenda."

"After further review, Secretary Hegseth has decided to terminate the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services," Pentagon Press Secretary Kingsley Wilson said in the statement. "The Committee is focused on advancing a divisive feminist agenda that hurts combat readiness, while Secretary Hegseth has focused on advancing uniform, sex-neutral standards across the Department."

A senior staff member with the office of Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-Penn., a former Air Force officer who has advocated for DACOWITS and service-level groups supporting efforts to develop policies and equipment that account for women, said the office had submitted numerous questions to the Pentagon about the termination memo.

The agenda of the most recent public DACOWITS meeting, held in December 2024 before quarterly meetings were paused, addressed recruiting and service propensity statistics; flexibility and permeability for transfers between services; the integration status of women serving on submarines; data on eating disorders and physical fitness, issues regarding menopause, perimenopause and hormonal imbalances; and the reintegration to service of troops who'd given birth.

A 70-year report on the committee's work, published in 2020, highlighted how more than 1,000 DACOWITS recommendations made since 1967 had informed Defense Department policy, with a 97% full or partial adoption rate as of 2019. Major themes since the 2010s, according to a data analysis, have been prevention of sexual assault and harassment, gender equality and integration, career progression and women's health and wellbeing. ■

DOD is reportedly eyeing the possibility of privatizing commissaries.

CPL. JUSTIN A. FISHER/MARINE CORPS

PENTAGON TAKES STEP TOWARD POTENTIALLY PRIVATIZING COMMISSARIES

BY KAREN JOWERS

Commissary officials have taken the first step toward the potential privatization of the military grocery stores, seeking input from the commercial grocery industry on whether they could take over the operation of 178 commissaries across the continental United States, Alaska, Hawaii and Puerto Rico.

The Defense Commissary Agency released an official Request for Information in September, a preliminary step before a Request for Proposals could be issued.

"The purpose of this RFI is to determine whether commercial grocery operators and investment firms are both interested in and capable of assuming commissary operations, with no government subsidy or with a materially reduced subsidy, while preserving the critical military benefit of a 23.7% average savings for authorized patrons," commissary officials stated.

Commissary stores receive more than $1.4 billion annually in taxpayer dollars to cover operational costs, including salaries, which enables the stores to provide the commissary benefit at a savings to patrons.

The request is the result of an April 7 DOD memorandum, which directs all functions not inherently governmental to be prioritized for privatization. It specifically cites retail sales and recreation as examples.

Military advocates have historically opposed proposals to privatize commissaries, voicing skepticism about the ability of a private entity to operate profitably and still deliver the benefit to military families.

The commissary's average savings of 23.7%, compared to local commercial grocery stores, is required by law. The RFI also includes another possible option for grocers: offering the 23.7% discount to eligible military patrons at their existing commercial grocery locations.

But there's a $2.4 billion caveat, according to the RFI. The Defense Department is also asking industry whether it can address the existing unfunded facilities maintenance backlog for commissaries through a $2.4 billion one-time infrastructure investment of about $500 million per year for up to five years, along with covering annual maintenance costs of around $250 million.

If DOD decides to privatize commissaries, the buildings and infrastructure may be offered to the operating commercial entity rent-free and in as-is condition, subject to the terms of the privatization agreement.

Industry should assume there will be no government subsidy, the RFI notes, but if a subsidy is required, industry should provide a general estimate of the amount of money needed, according to the RFI.

Industry should also assume operations will be conducted in accordance with all applicable laws and regulations, the RFI notes. The privatizing entity will be required to provide access to commissary food in any defense threat level that may require operations or delivery on a federal facility. DOD deemed commissaries' mission essential during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The store locations will remain the same, and the requirements for military installation access will remain unchanged.

The deadline for responses to the RFI is Oct. 21. ■

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PENTAGON-FUNDED RESEARCH AIDED CHINESE MILITARY, HOUSE REPUBLICAN REPORT SAYS

BY DIDI TANG AND COLLIN BINKLEY, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Over a recent two-year period, the Pentagon funded hundreds of projects done in collaboration with universities in China and institutes linked to that nation's defense industry, including many blacklisted by the U.S. government for working with the Chinese military, a congressional investigation has found.

The report, released in September by House Republicans on the Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, argues that the projects have allowed China to exploit U.S. research partnerships for military gains while the two countries are locked in a tech and arms rivalry.

"American taxpayer dollars should be used to defend the nation — not strengthen its foremost strategic competitor," Republicans wrote in the report.

"Failing to safeguard American research from hostile foreign exploitation will continue to erode U.S. technological dominance and place our national defense capabilities at risk," it added.

The Pentagon had not responded to a request for comment as of press time.

The congressional report said some DOD officials argued research should remain open as long as it is "neither controlled nor classified."

The report makes several recommendations to scale back U.S. research collaboration with China.

It also backs new legislation proposed by the committee's chairman, Rep. John Moolenaar, R-Michigan.

The bill would prohibit any DOD funding from going to projects done in collaboration with researchers affiliated with Chinese entities that the U.S. government identifies as security risks.

Beijing has in the past said science and technological cooperation between the two countries is mutually beneficial and helps them cope with global challenges.

The Chinese Embassy did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

REPUBLICANS SAY THE JOINT RESEARCH COULD HAVE MILITARY APPLICATIONS

The 80-page report builds on the committee's findings last year that partnerships between U.S. and Chinese universities over the past decade allowed hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding to help Beijing develop critical tech. Amid pressure from Republicans, several U.S. universities have ended their joint programs with Chinese schools in recent years.

The new report focuses more narrowly on the Defense Department and its billions of dollars in annual research funding.

The committee's investigation identified 1,400 research papers published between June 2023 and June 2025 that acknowledged support from the Pentagon and were done in collaboration with Chinese partners. The publications were funded by some 700 defense grants worth more than $2.5 billion. Of the 1,400 publications, more than half involved organizations affiliated with China's defense research and industrial base.

Dozens of those organizations were flagged for potential security concerns on U.S. government lists, though federal law does not prohibit research collaborations with them. The Defense Department money supported research in fields including hypersonic technology, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, advanced materials and next-generation propulsion.

Many of the projects have clear military applications, according to the report.

In one case, a nuclear scientist at Carnegie Science, a research institution in Washington, worked extensively on Pentagon-backed research while holding appointments at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Hefei Institute of Physical Sciences.

The scientist, who has done research on high-energy materials, nitrogen and high-pressure physics has been honored in China for his work to advance the country's national development goals, the report said. It called the case "a deeply troubling example" of how Beijing can leverage U.S. taxpayer-funded research to further its weapons development.

In another DOD-backed project, Arizona State University and the University of Texas partnered with researchers from Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Beihang University to study high-stakes decision-making in uncertain environments, which has direct applications for electronic warfare and cyber defense, the report said. The money came from the Office of Naval Research, the Army Research Office and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The Shanghai university is under the supervision of a central Chinese agency tasked with developing defense technology, and Beihang University, in the capital city of Beijing, is linked to the PLA and known for its aerospace programs.

CALLS FOR SCALING BACK RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS

The report takes issue with Defense Department policies that do not explicitly forbid research partnerships with foreign institutions that appear on U.S. government blacklists.

It makes more than a dozen recommendations, including a prohibition on any DOD research collaboration with entities on U.S. blacklists or "known to be part of China's defense research and industrial base."

Moolenaar's legislation includes a similar provision and proposes a ban on Defense Department funding for U.S. universities that operate joint institutes with Chinese universities.

A senior Education Department official said the report "highlights the vulnerability of federally funded research to foreign infiltration on America's campuses." Under Secretary of Education Nicholas Kent said the findings reinforce the need for more transparency around U.S. universities' international ties, along with a "whole-of-government approach to safeguard against the malign influence of hostile foreign actors."

House investigators said they are not seeking to end all academic and research collaborations with China but those with connections to the Chinese military and its research and industrial base. ■

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Soldiers of the 369th regiment, dubbed the Harlem Hellfighters, were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal over a century after their actions on the battlefield.

NPS

HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS AWARDED CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL

BY CLAIRE BARRETT AND J.D. SIMKINS

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in September to the Harlem Hellfighters, one of the most renowned Black combat units of World War I.

Descendants of those soldiers were in attendance to accept the recognition, Congress' highest civilian award, on behalf of their ancestors' actions during a ceremony in Washington. The approval of the medal was first passed in Congress on Aug. 9, 2021, during the Biden administration.

Highly decorated, the 369th Infantry Regiment was initially nicknamed the "Black Rattlers" for the rattlesnake insignia that adorned their uniforms.

The French called the unit "Men of Bronze," while it is believed that they gained their "Hellfighter" moniker from their German foes owing to their courage and ferocity in combat, according to the National Museum of American History and Culture.

The Hellfighters, like many non-white demographics in the 20th century, were forced to fight a war on two fronts. Before, during and well after the carnage of WWI, racism encountered by Black soldiers by their white American counterparts was severe.

U.S. Gen. John G. Pershing even went as far as authorizing the distribution of a pamphlet, titled "Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops," advising America's French allies against relying on — or even associating with — their Black peers.

In his correspondence, Pershing claimed the men of the 369th were "inferior" to white soldiers, acted as a "constant menace to the American" and didn't possess a "civic and professional conscience."

Burdened by a misguided reputation, the Harlem Hellfighters were initially relegated to labor-intensive duties.

That remained the case until they were ordered into battle in 1918 and assigned to the French Army, who seemed to care far less about race than their American allies.

It would be among the 16th Division of the French Army that the Harlem Hellfighters would learn how to survive the slog of trench warfare.

Such experiences, meanwhile, were left out of the Pentagon's announcement,

HARLEM *page 40*

THEIR STORIES ARE
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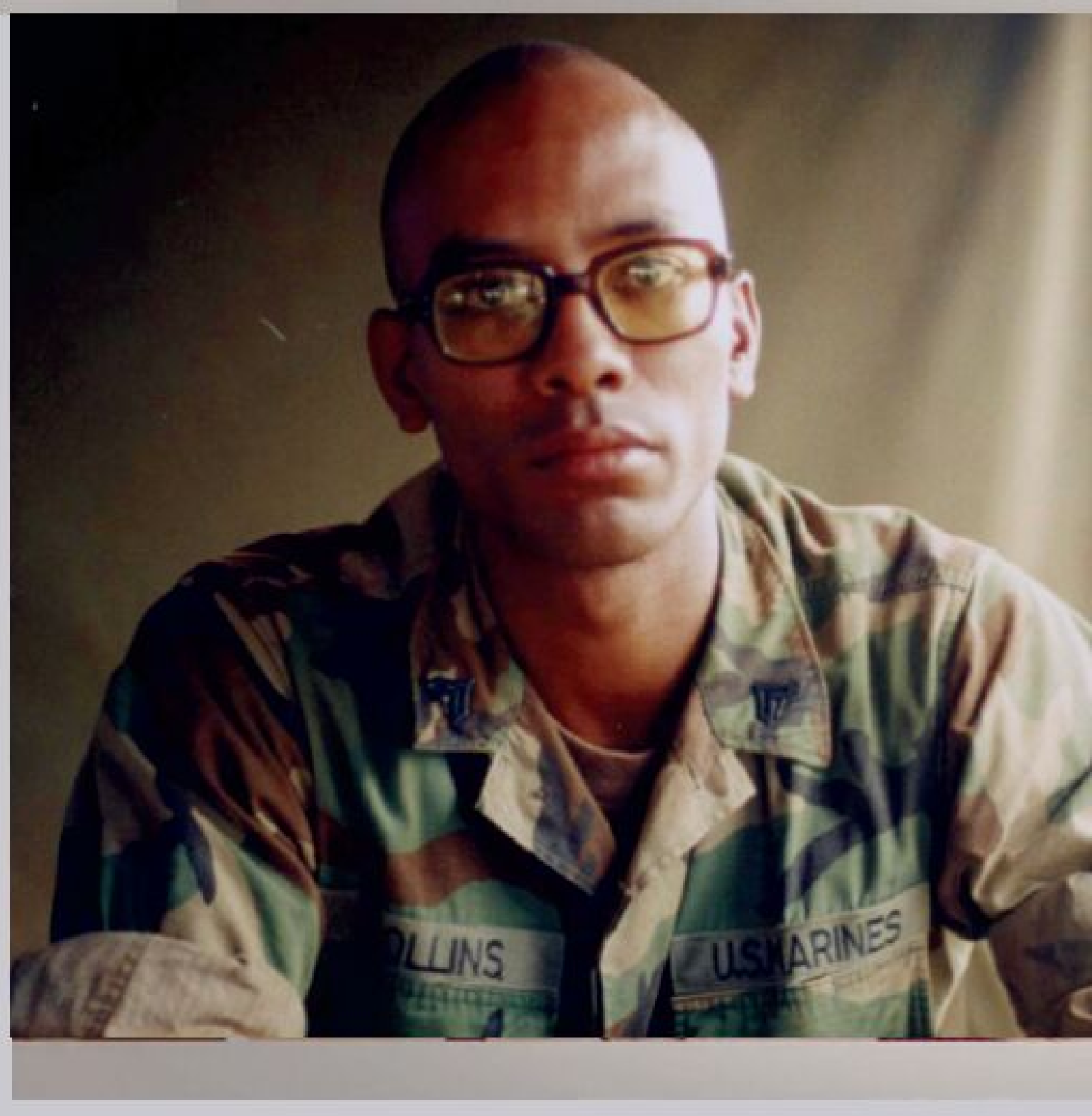

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HARLEM *page 38*

which only briefly acknowledged "racial tensions that came with serving in a segregated Army stateside."

The all-Black unit would go on to spend 191 days in continuous combat, more than any other American unit of its size.

During that time, about 1,400 soldiers were killed or wounded — suffering more losses than any other American regiment during the war.

According to the bill, the "369th never lost a foot of ground nor had a man taken prisoner, despite suffering a high number of casualties."

"After the war," writes the NMAHC, "the French government awarded the coveted Croix de Guerre medal to 171 members of the regiment, as well as a Croix de Guerre citation to the unit as a whole."

Among those men was Henry Johnson, whose bravery on May 15, 1918, led to him being posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor in 2015.

Johnson was standing guard with 17-year-old Needham Roberts early that morning when heard "snippin' and clippin'" sounds of at least 12 Germans cutting their way through the wire encircling the guard post.

In the dark, Johnson tossed a grenade in the direction of the commotion and all hell broke loose. The German invaders unleashed a wall of gunfire and grenades toward the two watchmen, injuring Needham Roberts immediately.

Unable to walk, Roberts sat upright in the trench and continued to feed Johnson grenades — but the Germans kept coming.

Johnson quickly exhausted the supply and switched to his rifle. It jammed. Enemy soldiers were close enough to touch.

When the Germans attempted to grab Roberts from the trench and take him prisoner, Johnson, who stood at only 5-foot-4 and 130 pounds, went to work, abandoning the cover of the trench and swinging his rifle, fists and bolo knife in a blur of clubbing, punching and cutting.

"Each slash meant something, believe me," Johnson once recalled.

It was later determined by observers that Johnson killed four of the enemy and wounded upwards of a dozen more.

Of his feat, the self-effacing private later recalled, "there wasn't anything so fine about it. Just fought for my life. A rabbit would have done that."

In June 2023, the Louisiana installation Fort Polk shed its Confederate namesake to honor Johnson, who suffered 21 injuries in the melee, including bullet and stab wounds to his head, torso, right arm and left leg, as well as a shattered left foot.

This past July, Hegseth, who presented the Gold Medal to Hellfighter descendants, personally oversaw the stripping of Johnson's name from the base in favor of returning it to one adjacent to its Confederate past — Gen. James H. Polk, who was awarded the Silver Star for his World War II service.

The Hellfighters initially received a hero's welcome at war's end, but their fame quickly faded into a small coda of World War I history — largely due to the nation's virulent racism.

Johnson himself contracted tuberculosis and later died, destitute, in July 1929 of myocarditis at the age of 36. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

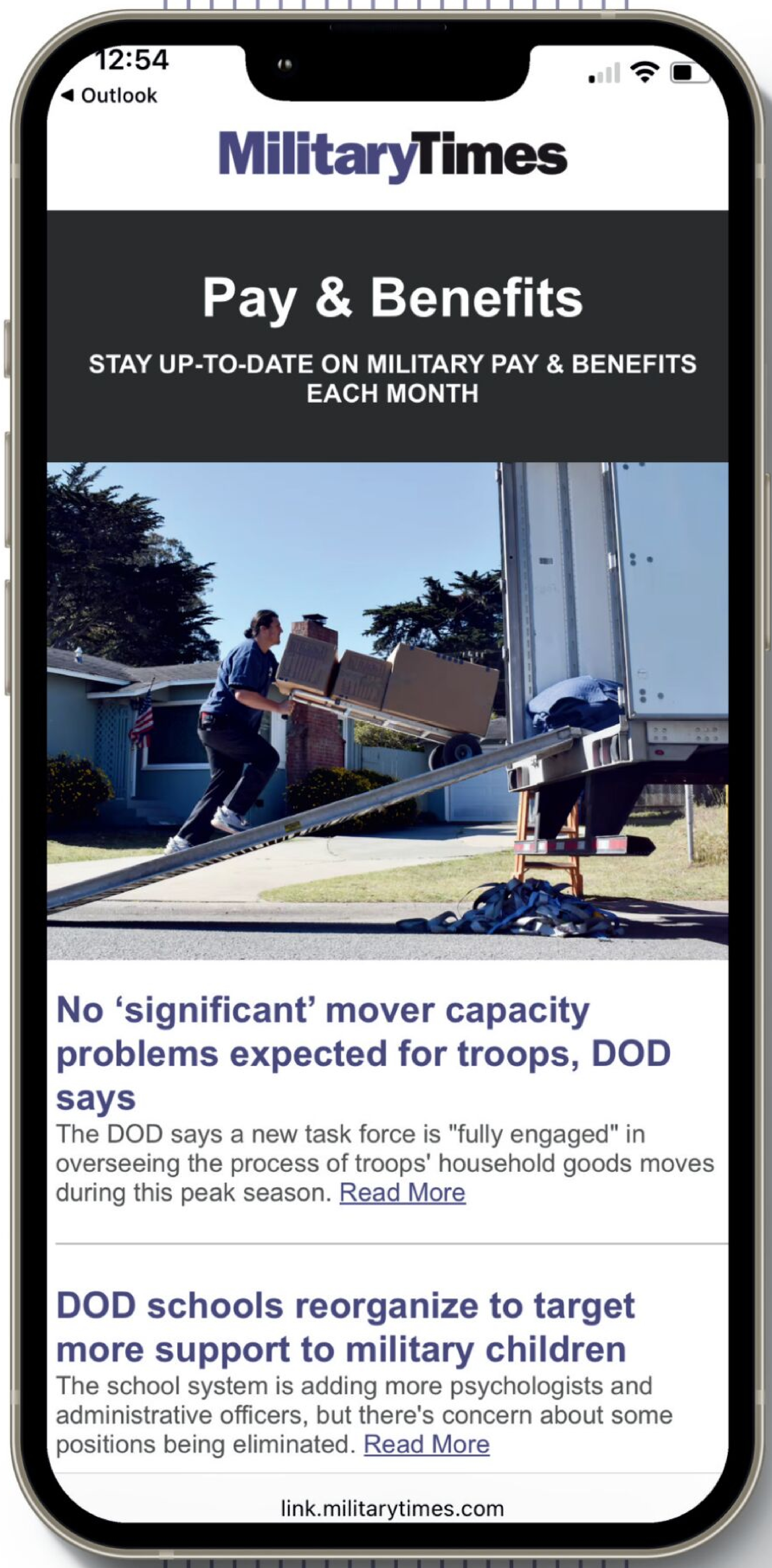
After more than a century since their heroic deeds, Congress has now given recognition where it is due.

"The symbol of the men we honor today as the Harlem Hellfighters; the symbol of these soldiers who were the bravest Americans," Hegseth said during the ceremony.

"We ought always thank almighty God for such men; and may we honor them forever, especially because they were not honored in their time," he concluded. ■

Henry Johnson.

NEW YORK STATE MILITARY MUSEUM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ONE MAN'S MEMORY SPARKS SEARCH FOR US SOLDIERS HE SAW EXECUTED IN WWII

Army Brig. Gen. Guy Fort, 1st Sgt. John Chandler, Capt. Albert Price, and Lt. Col. Robert Vesey (left to right) were POWs executed by the Japanese in the Philippines in 1942.

FORT FAMILY, ANCESTRY.COM, AND NEWSPAPERS.COM

Editor's note: This article first appeared on The War Horse, an award-winning nonprofit news organization educating the public on military service, under the headline "POW Witness: He was forced to watch an execution of U.S. soldiers. 80 years after WWII, his story sparks a search for their remains."

BY KEN MCLAUGHLIN, THE WAR HORSE

Growing up in the Philippines on the island of Mindanao, Ben Hagans and his friends climbed coconut trees on his family's plantation, fished for tuna and mahi-mahi, and raced homemade boats in the ocean—all without a stitch of clothing. When Ben was 9, his father took him on a six-month sailing adventure to Australia, India, and Vietnam.

But when he was 12, Ben's idyllic childhood abruptly ended. Imperial Japan invaded the archipelago nation just hours after bombing Pearl Harbor. And after Allied forces surrendered to the Japanese on Mindanao Island six months later, Ben and his parents spent most of World War II in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps, where his mother was forced into sexual slavery and Ben and his dad nearly died from starvation and illness.

Now, in the twilight of an extraordinary life, Benjamin Broadwell Hagans has emerged as an eyewitness to the savage executions of three U.S. soldiers on July 3, 1942. The 96-year-old retired firefighter's still-vivid memory of the killings is providing solid clues to finding the remains of not only those soldiers but also those of Army Brig. Gen. Guy Fort, the highest-ranking American military officer executed by enemy forces in World War II.

Fort, who lived on Mindanao Island for four decades, was called "a regular Daniel Boone" because of his wilderness skills and deep immersion in the local culture and languages. He is also remembered for his courage and unwavering resistance to the Japanese after his superiors ordered him to surrender 46 Americans and 300 Filipinos under his command in May 1942. He was executed by his captors that fall because he refused to order bands of fierce Muslim Moro guerrillas to stop fighting after supplying them with rifles and military equipment.

Fort reportedly taunted his executioners to the end, shouting: "You may get me, but you will never get the United States of America."

The general and the three U.S. soldiers executed on July 3—Lt. Col. Robert Vesey, Capt. Albert Price, and 1st Sgt. John Chandler—are memorialized on the Tablets of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery. The tablets are inscribed with the names of 36,286 Americans who perished in the Pacific theater during the Second World War but have no known graves.

In the late 1940s, the U.S. military failed to find the remains of Fort, Vesey, Price, and Chandler and deemed them "nonrecoverable." But a newly formed POW/MIA group is now hoping Ben Hagans' sharp memory will lead to identifying the remains at the site of a former Japanese

POW camp where the four Americans were executed.

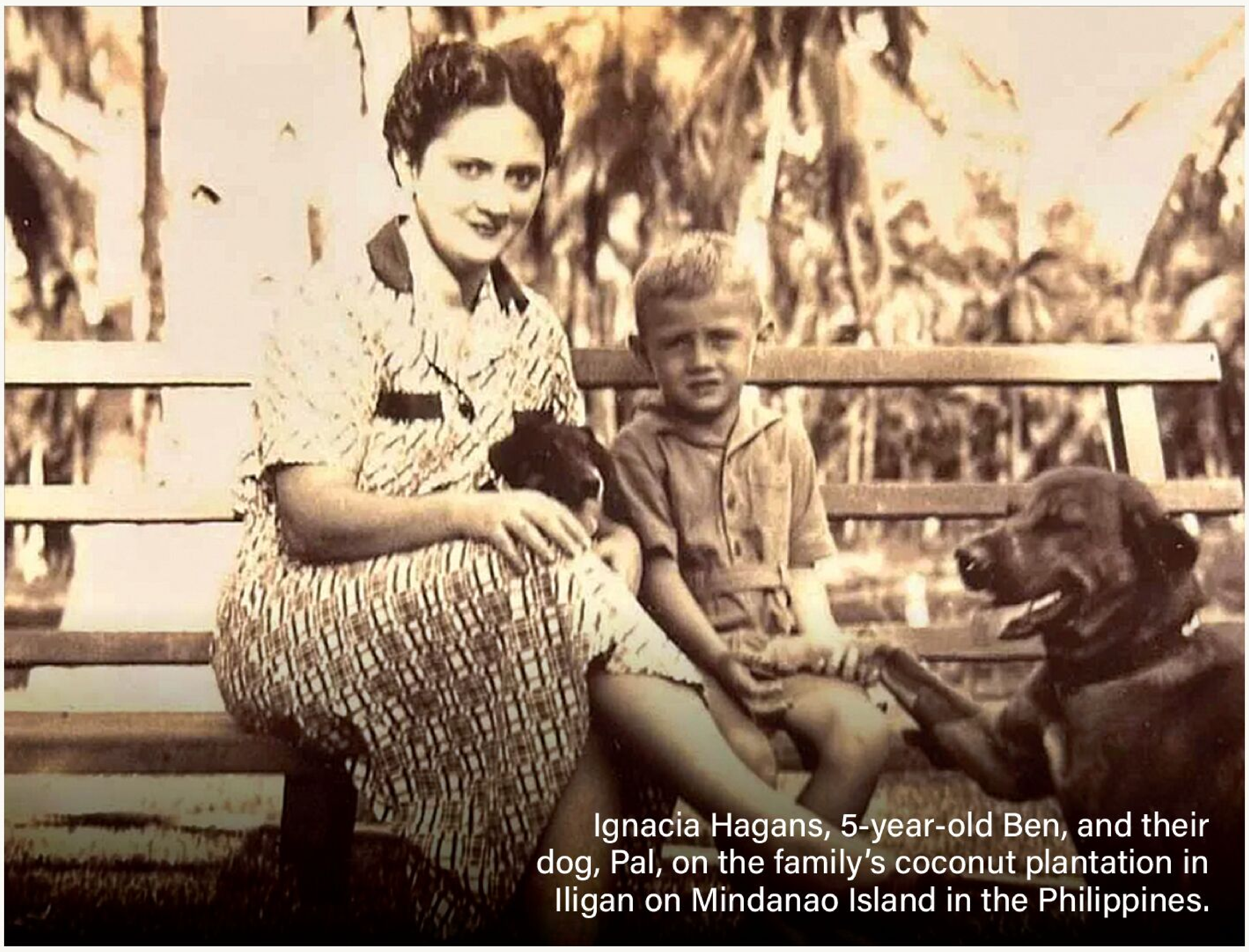
"Never in a million years did I think that someone would still be alive who could help our family—someone who actually knew Brig. Gen. Fort and someone who knows the Philippine islands so well because he actually grew up there," said Barbara Fox, a Southern California banker and real estate consultant whose stepfather, James Fort, was the son of the general.

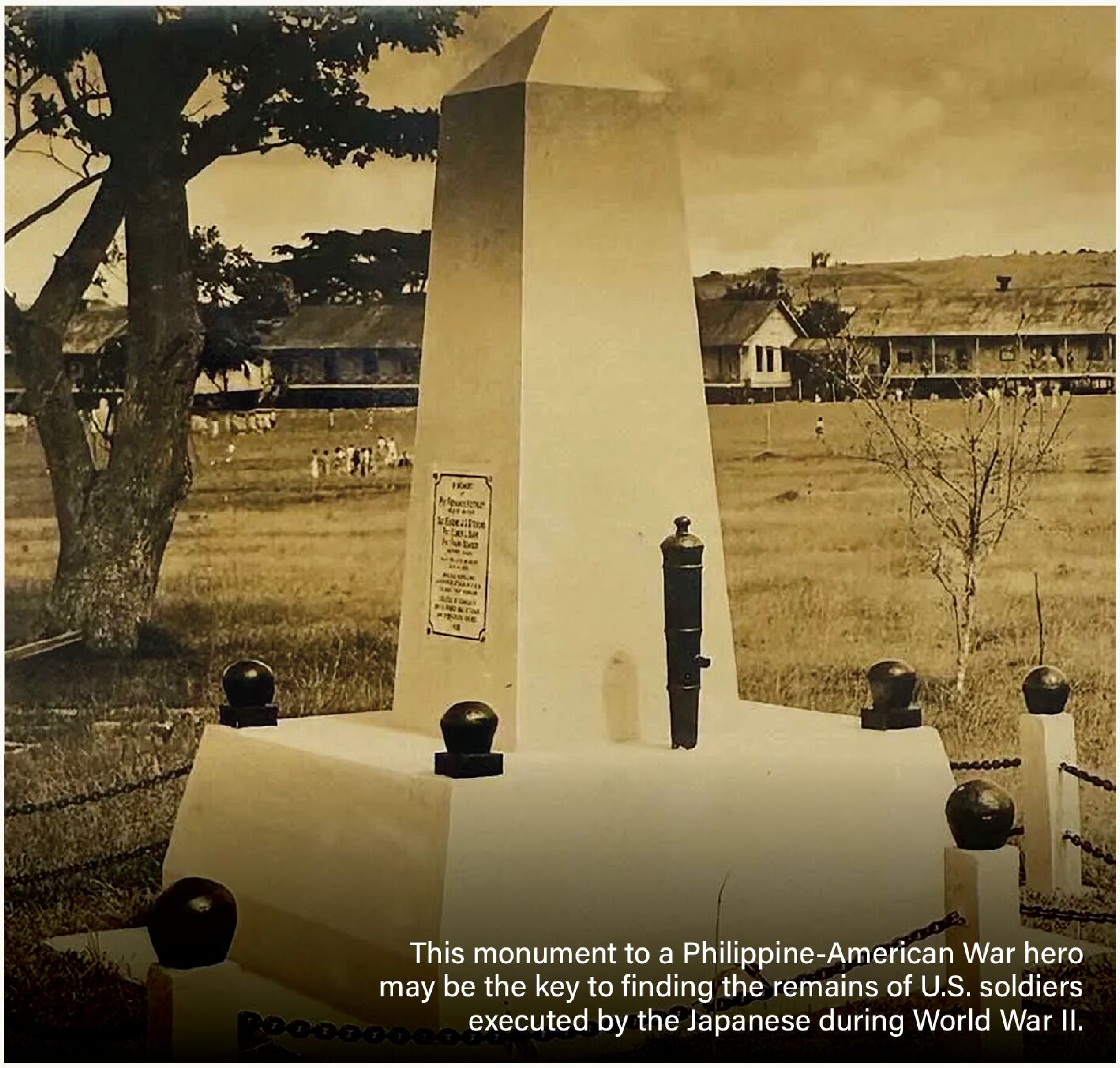
The War Horse set out to unravel the remarkable series of events that led to the renewed search for the remains of the four soldiers more than 80 years after the executions—which ultimately resulted in the 1949 hanging of Japanese Lt. Col. Yoshinari Tanaka for war crimes. Interviews with Ben Hagans and family members—along with transcripts and documents from international war-crimes tribunals in postwar Japan, as well as U.S. and Philippine military and POW records—all tell the story.

It was a flurry of emails and phone calls between Barbara Fox and POW/MIA researcher John Bear in September 2024 that prompted Bear to take an intense interest in the Fort execution and begin digging into the Philippines' wartime history.

In May, Bear came across a post by Kelly Hagans, Ben's daughter-in-law, on a Facebook group aimed at protecting the legacy of the Philippine Scouts, a highly respected supplemental U.S. Army force that was mainly composed of Filipino soldiers and commanded by U.S. officers.

The post highlighted her father-in-law's life and led Bear to a spellbinding interview Ben gave to the National World War II Museum in New Orleans in 2022 as part of an oral history project. Deep into the interview, Ben mentioned that he had witnessed the execution of American soldiers when he was a POW after serving in the Philippine Scouts.


Ignacia Hagans, 5-year-old Ben, and their dog, Pal, on the family's coconut plantation in Iligan on Mindanao Island in the Philippines.


This monument to a Philippine-American War hero may be the key to finding the remains of U.S. soldiers executed by the Japanese during World War II.

HAGANS FAMILY

Bear subsequently found a 1932 aerial photo of Camp Keithley, a former U.S. military installation on Mindanao Island that the Japanese had turned into a POW camp. He then tracked down Marty Hagans, Ben's son, a retired California State Police officer who lives with his wife and his father in Dayton, Nevada. Bear asked Marty to show the photo to his dad to see if he could pinpoint where Vesey, Price, and Chandler were executed and buried.

As Kelly recorded a video of the conversation between her father-in-law and husband, Ben pointed to specific Camp Keithley features such as the nearby Agus River and a bridge that crosses the river—features that were not easily seen in the photo because of the camera angle.

"I knew then that his memory was sharp as a tack," Bear recalled. "Once Ben had oriented himself to the photo, he pointed out where he remembered the execution taking place."

Ben also pointed to the spot where he believes Vesey, Price, and Chandler were buried—close to an obelisk monument that was erected in 1939 to honor Pvt. Fernando Guy Keithley, a hero in the Philippine-American War.

Marty Hagans says when he explained the historical significance of his father's vivid memories to him, he immediately agreed to help in the decades-old search for the soldiers' remains. "He was absolutely stunned when he found out that the remains of these heroes haven't been returned to their families," his son told The War Horse.

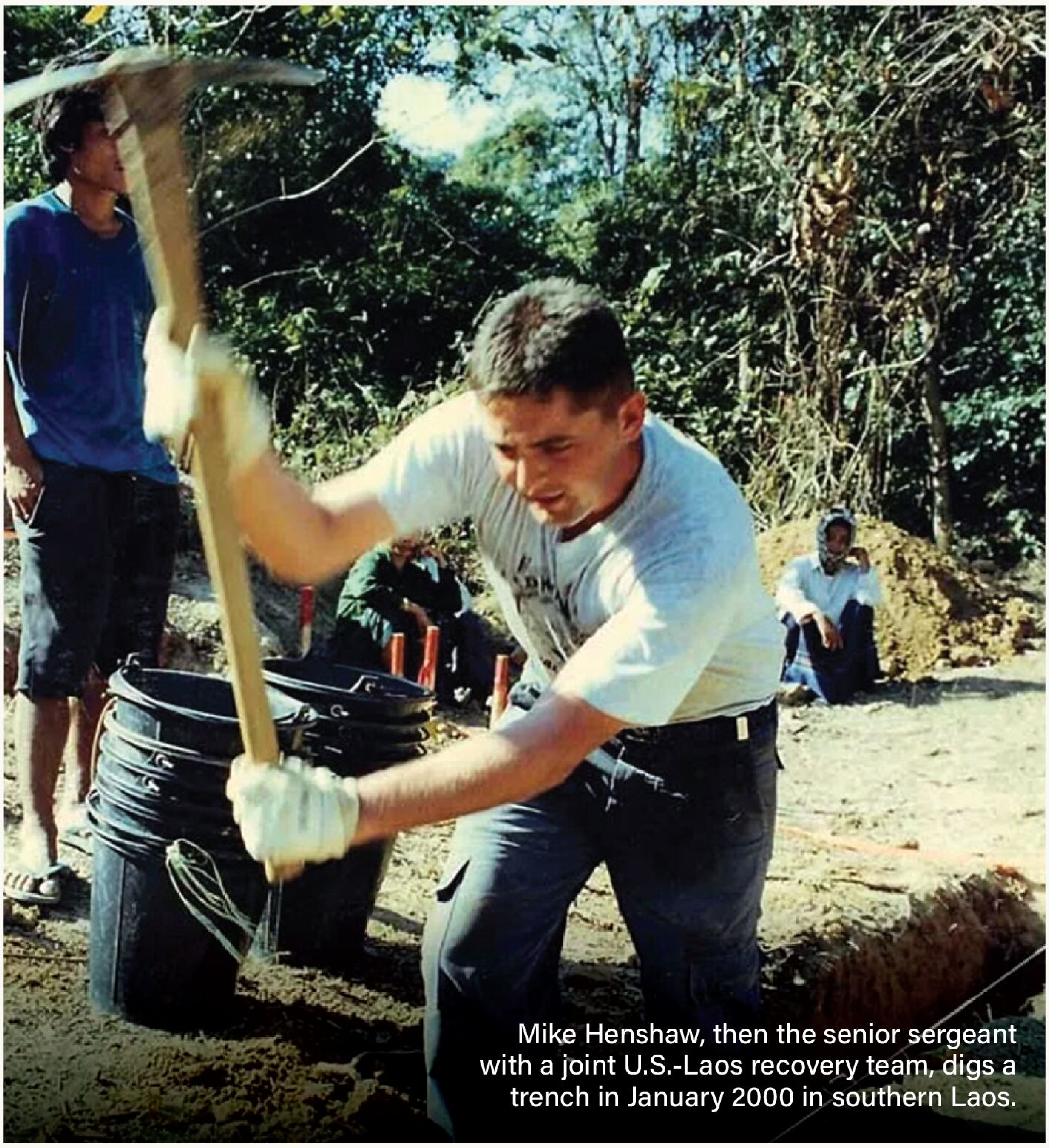
Through his research, Bear is convinced that when teams of American soldiers searched in vain for Gen. Fort's remains in the late 1940s, they were looking on the wrong side of the Agus River because the north-south axis of the hand-drawn map the soldiers were using was substantially off.

Mike Henshaw, a 25-year U.S. Army veteran from Virginia who has taken part in scores of recovery missions that have led to the identification of the remains of more than 100 service members missing from past wars, reviewed the new evidence and believes there's a strong chance of locating the four sets of remains.

The timing was auspicious. In January, Henshaw founded the Asymmetric MIA Accounting Group, an all-volunteer nonprofit dedicated to bringing home the remains of missing service members. He and his recovery team plan to travel to the Philippines sometime this fall.

The obelisk monument is now gone, but finding its buried foundation with ground-penetrating radar "should be straightforward—and could provide the key to solving the mystery," Henshaw said.

Jay Silverstein, a prominent POW/MIA forensic anthropologist, told The War Horse that Henshaw's team should be able to find identifiable remains if the new information from Ben Hagans and Bear helps them locate the graves.


Mike Henshaw, then the senior sergeant with a joint U.S.-Laos recovery team, digs a trench in January 2000 in southern Laos.

MIKE HENSHAW

"There's a very good chance that you'll find teeth, and there's a fair chance you'll find bones as well. Some of the denser areas of the skull preserve well and are also good for extracting DNA. But it really depends on the environmental conditions. From my experience, skeletal remains—although in some cases degraded by insects and roots, or fragile due to moisture and soil chemistry—endure for hundreds or even thousands of years in most environments."

The task of locating and retrieving the four soldiers' remains became more daunting in May 2017 when Philippine security forces conducted an operation to capture an ISIS-aligned emir believed to be hiding in the Islamic City of Marawi, formerly known as Dansalan. The operation was met with violent resistance by Islamist militants, sparking a five-month-long battle.

Because the U.S. State Department still considers the area unsafe to visit, the U.S. Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has expressed concern about operating there. But Henshaw, a Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom combat veteran with two Bronze Stars, said his organization was formed to operate in difficult environments where official agencies cannot. "I plan to move forward cautiously but remain determined to honor the fallen," Henshaw said.

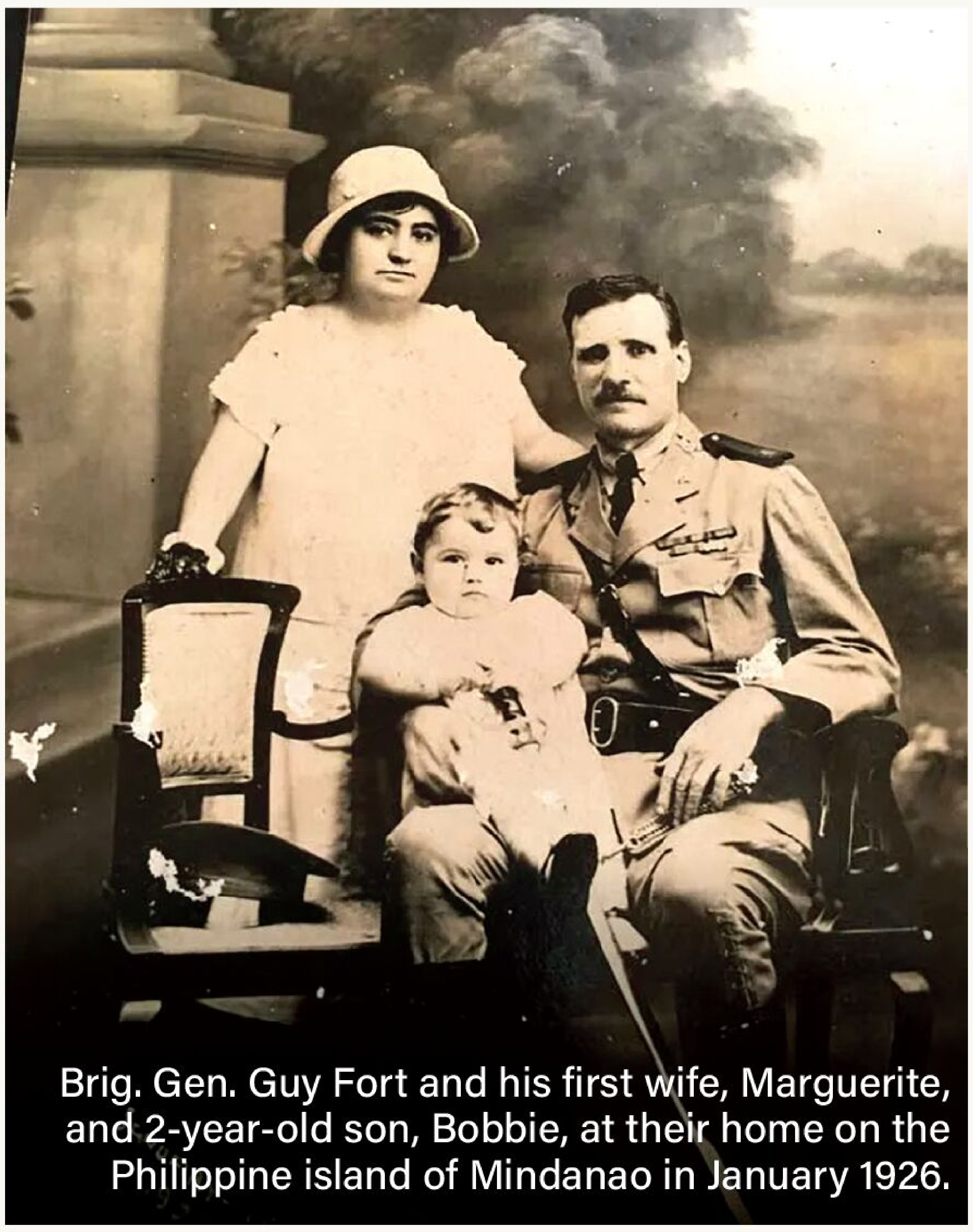
The executions of Vesey, Price, and Chandler occurred several weeks after Ben Hagans' regiment of the Philippine Scouts surrendered in May 1942, when the prisoners were moved to Camp Keithley. Ben's mother and father, a U.S. Army officer, also were taken captive.

The Japanese warned the new prisoners not to try to escape. If they did, the captors vowed, they would execute an equal number of POWs.

After four American soldiers escaped on the night of July 1 or July 2, the Japanese showed their captives it was no idle threat. The next day, the captors tied Gen. Fort and three other American soldiers to wooden stakes and prepared to execute them.

Then, Ben said, Lt. Col. Vesey stepped forward and told the executioners: "Cut the general down. I'll take his place."

At the last minute, the camp's commander also granted a reprieve to one of



Brig. Gen. Guy Fort and his first wife, Marguerite, and 2-year-old son, Bobbie, at their home on the Philippine island of Mindanao in January 1926.

Civil engineer and plantation owner Broadwell Hagans with his son, Ben, and their dog, Pal.

FORT FAMILY; HAGANS FAMILY

the four Americans originally targeted for execution, Col. Eugene Mitchell, at the request of a Japanese lieutenant who had befriended Mitchell.

Fort's reprieve proved to be temporary. On or about Nov. 11, 1942, the Japanese executed him by firing squad at Camp Keithley for continually spurning their pleas to tell the Moro guerrillas to lay down their arms. He was buried less than a mile from the graves of the other executed soldiers, researcher Bear has calculated.

For the 12-year-old Ben, Vesey's execution was excruciatingly painful. Vesey was a 1918 West Point graduate whose hometown was Hope, Arkansas, and he was a longtime friend of Ben's father, Broadwell Hagans. A major in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Hagans worked closely with Gen. Douglas MacArthur (who called Hagans' precocious son "Benny") on the Malinta tunnel complex on Corregidor Island.

"Col. Vesey was a great man," Ben told The War Horse. "He was loved by everybody. I probably saw him three times a week when I was growing up. He would come by our house to talk to my father, but he always greeted me and always told me, 'It was a pleasure talking to you.'"

Ben recounted how he and about 100 other prisoners were forced to stand about 50 yards from the execution site as Vesey and the other soldiers were repeatedly bayoneted. "It took them two and a half hours to bleed to death as we stood there," Ben said. "I put my eyes down and tried not to look."

The next day was the Fourth of July, and Ben and his parents were among the hundreds of Filipino and American soldiers and civilians forced to march about 25 miles in one day from Camp Keithley to Iligan, where Ben grew up.

The Mindanao Death March, which the Japanese had mockingly dubbed "The Independence Day March," has been overshadowed in history books by the infamous Bataan Death March on the island of Luzon. But it was no less brutal.

As the scorching tropical sun bore down on them, Ben said, the Mindanao marchers hiked through a mountainous jungle and were given little food and water. Those who were unable to keep up were often shot to death, usually in the forehead.

The Americans were tied together with telephone wire in groups of four. The Filipino prisoners, many dressed only in rags, were forced to walk barefoot on a hot and rocky dirt road.

Ben recalls Filipino villagers along the way slipping the marchers gourds of rainwater, bananas, and rice. Those villagers caught helping the prisoners were beaten or fatally shot, and their homes were torched as a warning to others to stay away.

After arriving in Iligan, the prisoners spent two nights in a dilapidated school building and then were crammed onto a cannon boat that sailed to Cagayan de Oro, where they spent two days on a pier waiting to be taken to a network of POW camps. Ben told The War Horse he watched in horror as Japanese troops raped his mother.

Ben and his father were sent to different camps for military POWs. His mother, Ignacia, who was born in the Philippines and was of Spanish and Scottish descent, was sent to the sprawling Santo Tomas Internment Camp for civilians in Manila and forced to become a "comfort woman"—the Japanese euphemism for a sex slave.

She was one of as many as 200,000 women and girls forced into sexual servitude during Japan's conquest of Asian countries. The overwhelming majority of the women were Asian—mostly Korean, Chinese, and Filipina. But a tiny percentage were European and American civilians captured during the war.

"She never got over it," Ben said. "She was very, very bitter and became reclusive and stayed in the Philippines her whole life. I did not resent her for that."

Ben was only 12 when he joined the 43rd Infantry Regiment of the Philippine Scouts just two days after Pearl Harbor. He had tried to join the U.S. Army, but was turned down because of his age.

The Scouts were thrilled to have him because he not only spoke fluent English but had also mastered Cebuano, the main language spoken on Mindanao Island. So after three days of military training, he was put to work as a courier. He was also issued a .30-40 Krag-Jørgensen rifle and was once gravely wounded when the shrapnel from a mortar round ripped into his legs and left arm.

In his two and a half years as a POW, he was shuttled from camp to camp—seven in total.

"The food was almost nonexistent," Ben said.

His diet consisted mostly of watered-down rice and only an occasional vegetable. The POWs, he said, were often forced to kill their own food, eating virtually anything that moved for protein—snakes, dogs, cats, rats, and millipedes.

On Oct. 20, 1944, Gen. MacArthur's forces landed on Leyte Island, marking the start of the Philippines liberation campaign. But little information filtered into the POW camps.

Ben's eyes light up when he talks about the January day in 1945 when he was transferred to the Santo Tomas camp and saw his parents for the first time in two and a half years.

"Until then I didn't know where they were, or if they had survived or not," he said.

He also cracks a smile when he talks about Feb. 3, 1945.

"It was about 9 p.m. when I looked at the front gate of the camp, and I saw this tank coming in and thought it was a Japanese tank," he said. But soon a soldier from the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division popped out of the top of the tank and asked Ben and his fellow POWs where they could find their Japanese captors. "Then the soldier reached down and started throwing candy bars at us," Ben said.

After a ferocious firefight in which the Japanese held more than 200 internees hostage in a building, the enemy troops were granted safe passage in exchange for releasing the hostages.

Then, at midnight, the 1st Cavalry laid out a great spread for all the prisoners. "Apples, pears, oranges, sweet rolls, oatmeal, ham, good old Spam," Ben recalled.

Ben's teeth were so loose that all he could eat was the oatmeal. But he went through the line nine times.

Ben Hagans was only 12 when he was imprisoned by Japanese troops.

The next morning, Army medical officers gave all the prisoners a series of shots and vitamin pills and put everyone on a scale. Ben, then 15 years old, weighed 56 pounds.

A few days after the camp was liberated, Ben thought he spotted someone he knew from a distance, but suspected it might be a mirage. Could that be his older brother Bill? In a U.S. Navy officer's uniform?

"It's Bill! It's Bill!" he shouted to his parents, who refused to believe it until they all fell into each other's arms.

Bill was one of Ben's four half-siblings from his father's first marriage. The four had all left the Philippines before the

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Gen. Douglas MacArthur wades ashore on the Philippine island of Leyte in October 1944 after Allied forces secured the beachhead.

MARTY HAGANS; NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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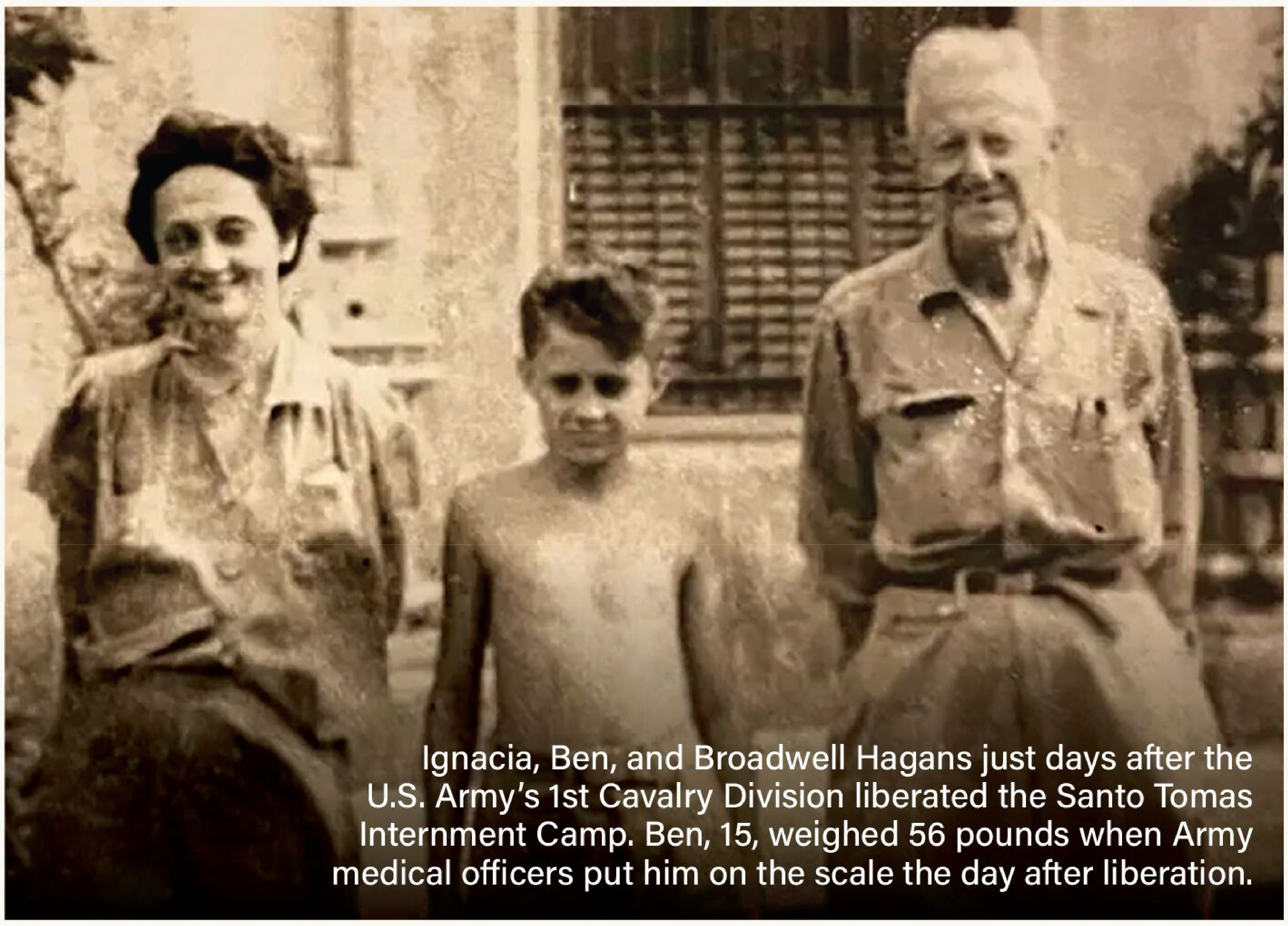
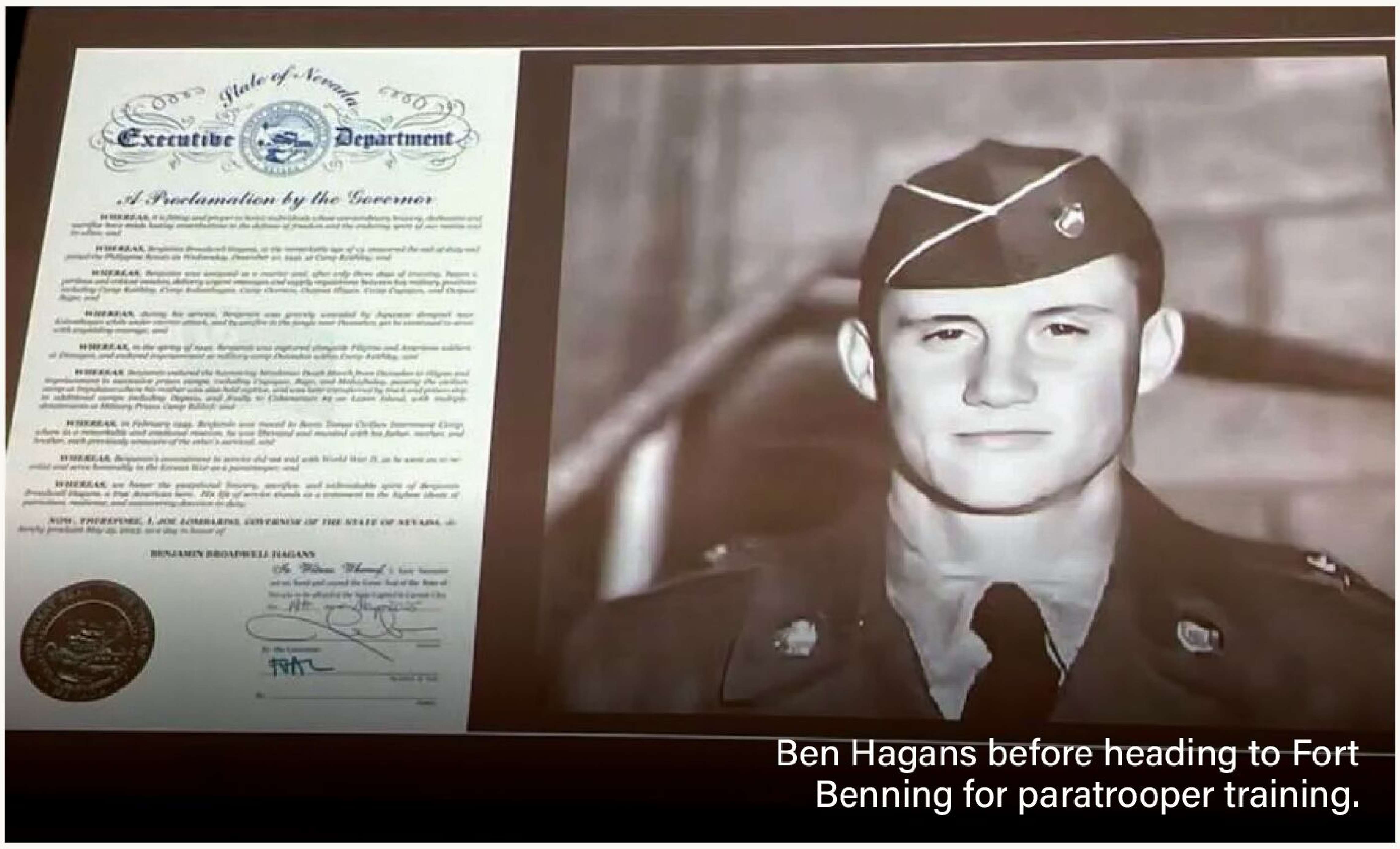


Ignacia, Ben, and Broadwell Hagans just days after the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division liberated the Santo Tomas Internment Camp. Ben, 15, weighed 56 pounds when Army medical officers put him on the scale the day after liberation.



Ben Hagans before heading to Fort Benning for paratrooper training.

HAGANS FAMILY/THE WAR HORSE

Japanese invaded in 1941. But Bill enlisted in the Navy in Michigan and was sent on a three-year mission in the Philippines to find out the location of the POW camps and who was in them. The short, fair-complected Bill had posed as a Filipino peasant by taking the bark of betel nut trees, mashing it into pulp, and rubbing it over his skin to darken it.

Two months after Mindanao's camps were liberated, Ben boarded a ship to the States to be treated for a host of diseases, including dysentery, beriberi, parasitic flatworms, dengue fever, and malaria. He was in three military hospitals for a year and a half before a physician discovered Ben had cholera and that all his other diseases were masking the symptoms.

Once he was treated for cholera, Ben recovered and was released within weeks.

Ben, who had been homeschooled in the Philippines, settled in California's San Joaquin Valley and entered Fresno State to study agriculture and forestry. He had just finished his freshman year when North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea, and President Harry Truman ordered the U.S. military to intervene.

An Army reservist, Ben was called up in his sophomore year. Although Army officials told him he wouldn't have to go to Korea because he was a former POW, he didn't ask for an exemption and was sent to Fort Benning in Georgia to train to become a paratrooper. He ended up doing two tours in Korea and getting promoted on the battlefield to second lieutenant.

After that war was over, he joined California's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and became a firefighter. He ended his 32-year career as a battalion chief in Tulare County.

He earned a fistful of medals from his wartime experience, including three Purple Hearts and a POW medal. But the one that would mean the most to him—a medal for his service in the Philippine Scouts—has eluded him for decades. He and his son were told the records were among the millions destroyed in the 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis.

Ben still has nightmares about the time his Japanese captors beat him severely for stealing oats and rice meant for the horses, the three days he was forced to drink his own urine to survive a "hell ship" transporting POWs, and seeing fellow prisoners having their heads lopped off with swords.

"He has these dreams every single day and every single night," his son said. "I hear him, and I know which are the bad ones."

Ben uses a walker now. But that didn't stop him from celebrating his 96th birthday in July by skydiving. It was his second birthday jump in two years. Counting his jumps as a paratrooper in Korea, that makes 117.

Is he going to stop now?

"Nope," he said with a chuckle. "The next jump is when I turn 100. That will be the last one." ■

This War Horse story was edited by Mike Frankel, fact-checked by Jess Rohan, and copy-edited by Mitchell Hansen-Dewar. Hrisanthi Pickett wrote the headlines.

Ken McLaughlin is a freelance writer based in Scotts Valley, California. He spent 35 years at the San Jose Mercury News as a reporter, editorial writer and editor. He's written extensively about politics, marine science, Vietnam, immigration, and race and demographics. He has a master's in journalism from Stanford University and taught aspiring science writers for a decade at UC Santa Cruz.

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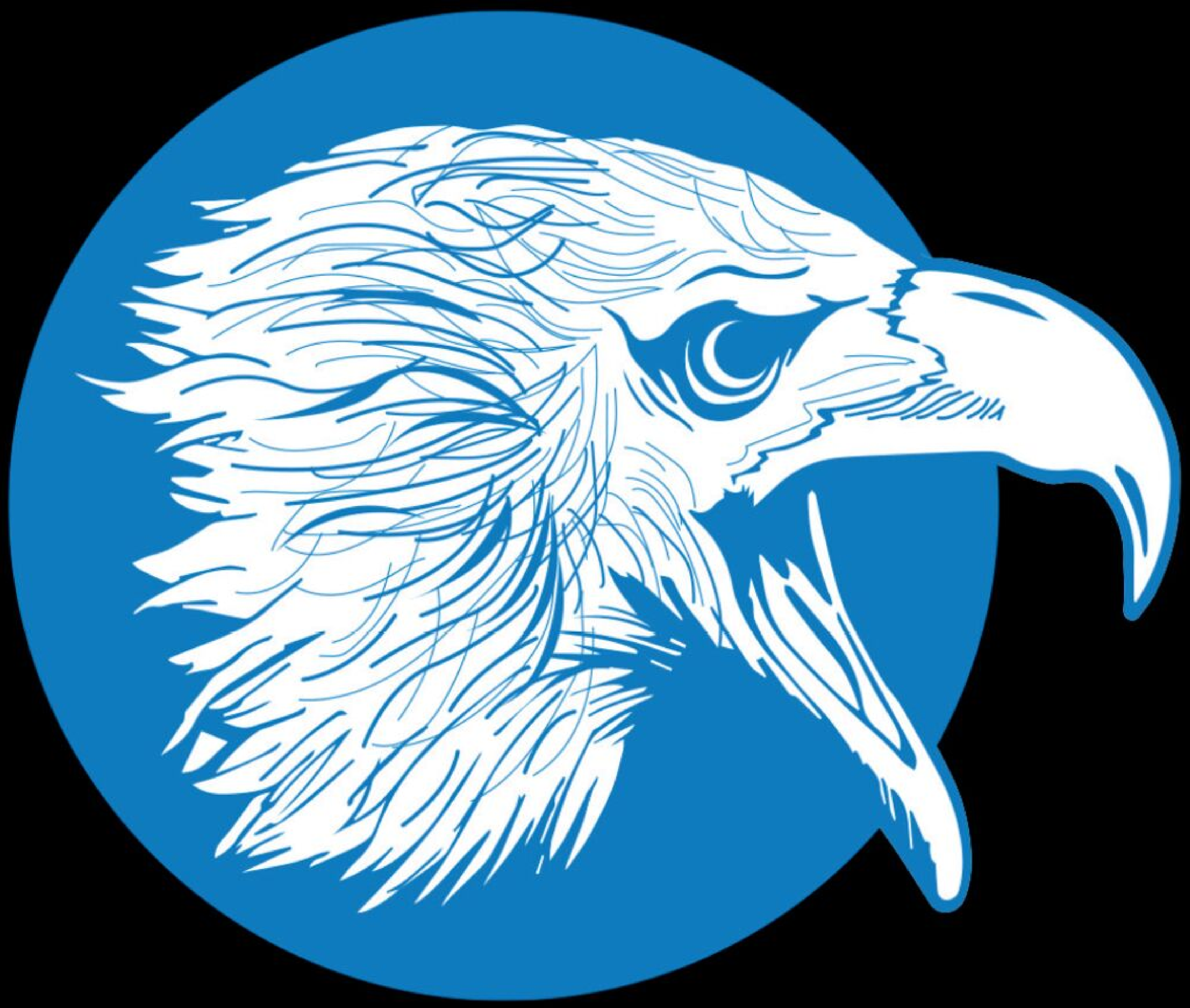

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“Lucky”

COURTESY OF JOHN LUCKADOO

JOHN LUCKADOO, LAST B-17 PILOT OF THE BLOODY HUNDREDTH, DIES AT 103

BY J.D. SIMKINS AND CLAIRE BARRETT

Maj. John “Lucky” Luckadoo, the last surviving B-17 pilot of the Eighth Air Force’s famed “Bloody Hundredth” Bombing Group, died in his home Sept. 1, his family announced. He was 103.

“The Major left formation the evening of September 1st and completed his final mission to bluer skies,” a message on Luckadoo’s official website said.

Born March 16, 1922, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Luckadoo would join the U.S. Army Air Forces months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

He was just a wide-eyed 21-year-old lieutenant assigned to the Mighty Eighth’s 100th Bomb Group when he manned the controls and took to the sky for his first bombing mission over Nazi Germany as co-pilot of a famed B-17 Flying Fortress.

The aeronautical revelation at Luckadoo’s fingertips could fly at altitudes of 35,000 feet for up to 2,800 miles. And it did so carrying a hefty bomb payload supplemented by 10 .50-caliber machine guns.

Flying it, however, was deadly. So much so that the odds of a B-17 crewman surviving the 25 missions required to complete a combat tour were only one in four.

Until the 1944 introduction of the P-51 Mustang to the air war over Europe, the B-17’s impressive distance capabilities meant daylight bombing runs over Germany would have to be done without fighter escorts, leaving inexperienced B-17 crews to fend for themselves against the seasoned pilots of the Luftwaffe.

What was worse, German anti-aircraft batteries peppered American bombers with 88mm shells — or “flak” — hurled five miles into the air that would explode within feet of a B-17 flying at bombing altitude.

One Flying Fortress crew member went so far as to compare the ever-present threat of shrapnel to Russian roulette.

“You were going to be hit by it,” he said. “It was just a matter of where it would hit you and when.”

Luckadoo recalled the such experiences years ago in an interview with the National World War II Museum, saying the flak was

LUCKY *page 52*

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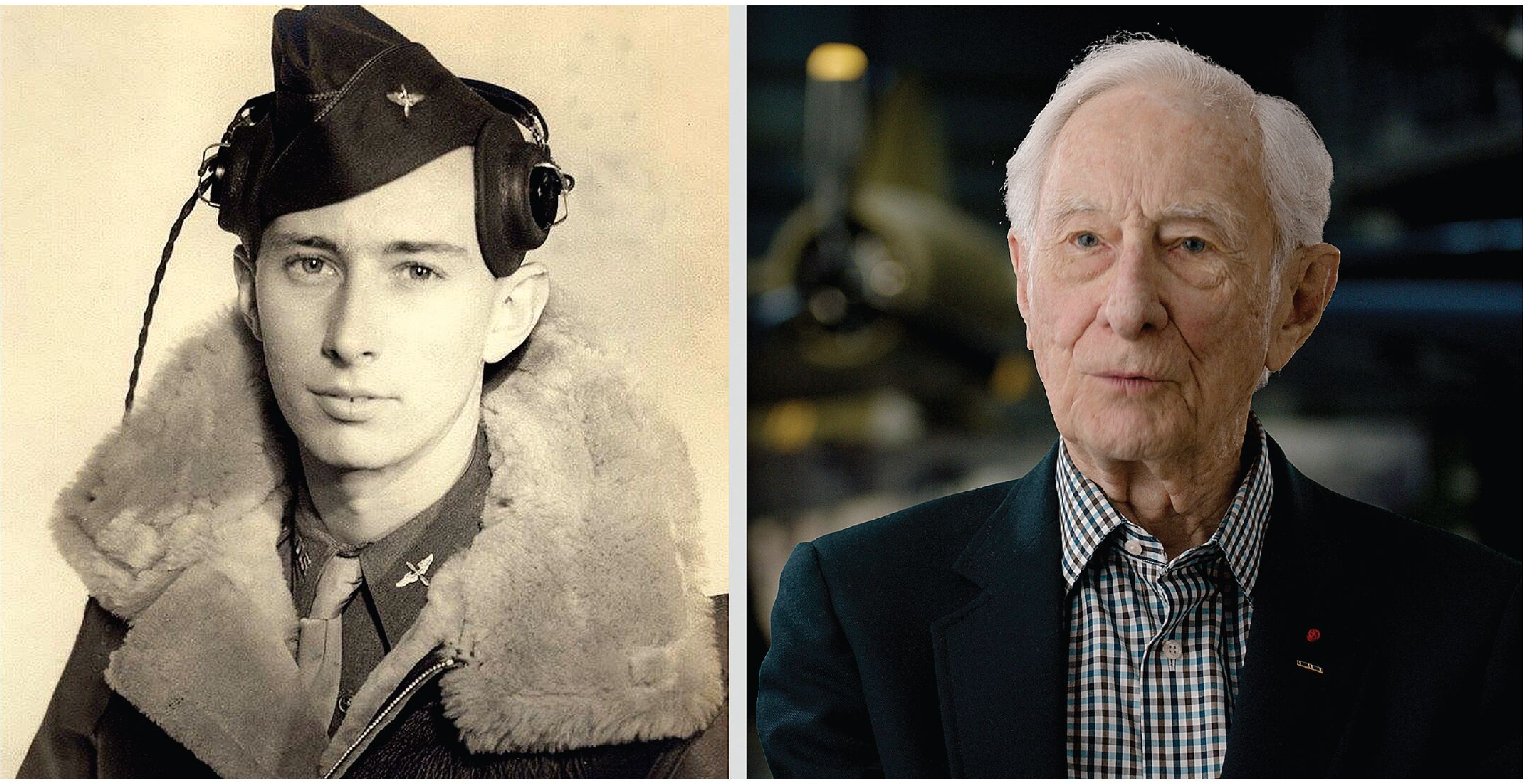

John "Lucky" Luckadoo as a young man, and featured in 2019's "Memphis Belle in Color."

LUCKY *page 50*

"so thick that you could put your wheels down and taxi on it."

"Lucky," a fitting moniker bestowed upon him by his men, would be one of the fortunate few to beat the odds and complete 25 missions, but certainly not before the war left its indelible mark.

On Oct. 8, 1943, Lucky took to the sky for his 22nd mission, one that would be forever etched into his memory.

"The Germans had moved in some 300 88mm guns to protect their targets," he previously told Military Times. "We had never seen them throw up such a heavy barrage of defenses. Also, what we had never experienced or witnessed before was the fact that their fighters were attacking us through their own flak."

The desperate tactics Lucky witnessed that day were just getting underway.

"As we turned on the initial point for our bomb run, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that there was this flight of Focke-Wulf 190s that were headed straight for our squadron," he recalled. "They fired all the way coming in. ... Our gunners were pouring out as much as they could to dissuade them, but they never veered in the slightest. The lead airmen of the fighters actually rammed the ship directly in front of me. ... They both exploded."

Lucky was forced to dip the nose of his plane to avoid a midair collision.

"His wingman actually scraped my top turret as he went across. That's how close they came to ramming me."

Amidst the exchange, one of Lucky's engines had been taken out by flak.

Making matters worse, the plexiglass nose of his plane blew out, leaving the crew of the unpressurized plane exposed to temperatures of 50-below at 21,000 feet.

"I suffered the only injury — physical injury — of my entire tour on that mission, and that was frostbitten feet," he said. "They were frozen to the rudder pedals so when I landed I had to land with my heels. I couldn't even apply the brakes.

"The horror of that mission stayed with me for the rest of my tour."

By the end of February 1943, half of the crews belonging to the "Mighty Eighth" had been shot down.

Capt. Robert Morgan, pilot of the famed B-17 Memphis Belle, noted that it seemed like each day, airmen would have breakfast with a crew of 10 but dinner with just two.

Morgan and his crew would become the eventual subjects of Oscar-winning director William Wyler's film, "Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress."

Lucky, meanwhile, returned to the U.S. in March 1944 and would go on to attend instrument school at Bryan Army Air Field in College Station, Texas, where he would meet his eventual wife, according to the National WWII Museum.

After the war, the G.I. Bill would help Lucky earn a degree from the University of Denver. In his later years he would take on an active role in educating younger generations about the horrors and bravery of the air war over Europe.

Such advocacy led to Luckadoo being awarded in 2021 with The National WWII Museum's Silver Service Medallion. He would also be the subject of a 2022 book by Kevin Maurer, Damn Lucky: One Man's Courage During the Bloodiest Military Campaign in Aviation History.

The book, like his nickname, bears a fitting title for one who, throughout his 103 remarkable years, acknowledged the undeniable fortune of longevity after such experiences.

"The truth of the matter is, nobody goes into battle and comes out the same," Luckadoo said. "You're a different person with a different perspective, a different psychology. You're happy to be alive and you don't really know why, but you realize that you've been spared and you just thank your lucky stars you were. You had a guardian angel on your shoulder. It was just a matter of pure luck you survived.

"That's why they called me 'Lucky.' They ought to call me 'Darn Lucky.'" ■

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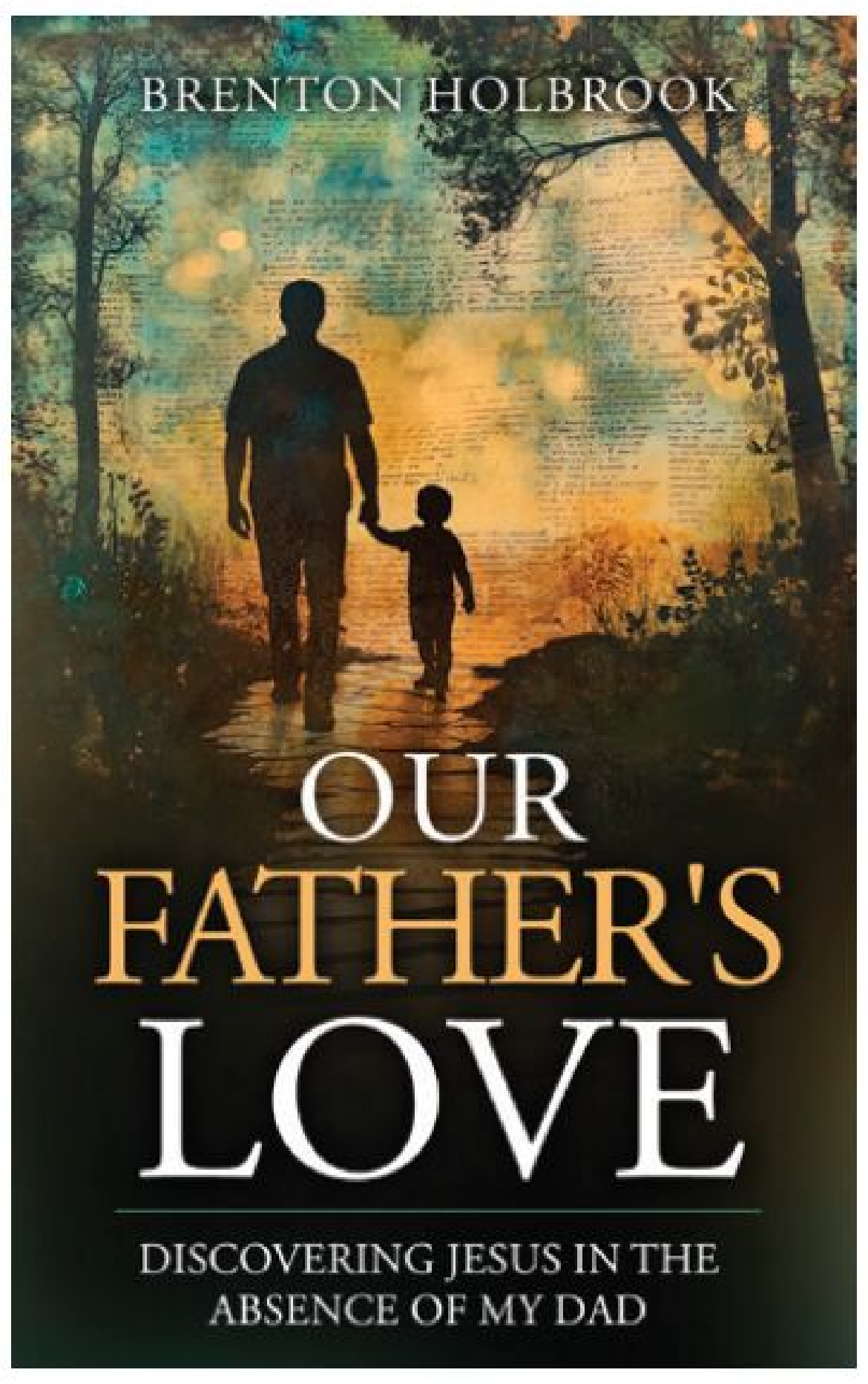
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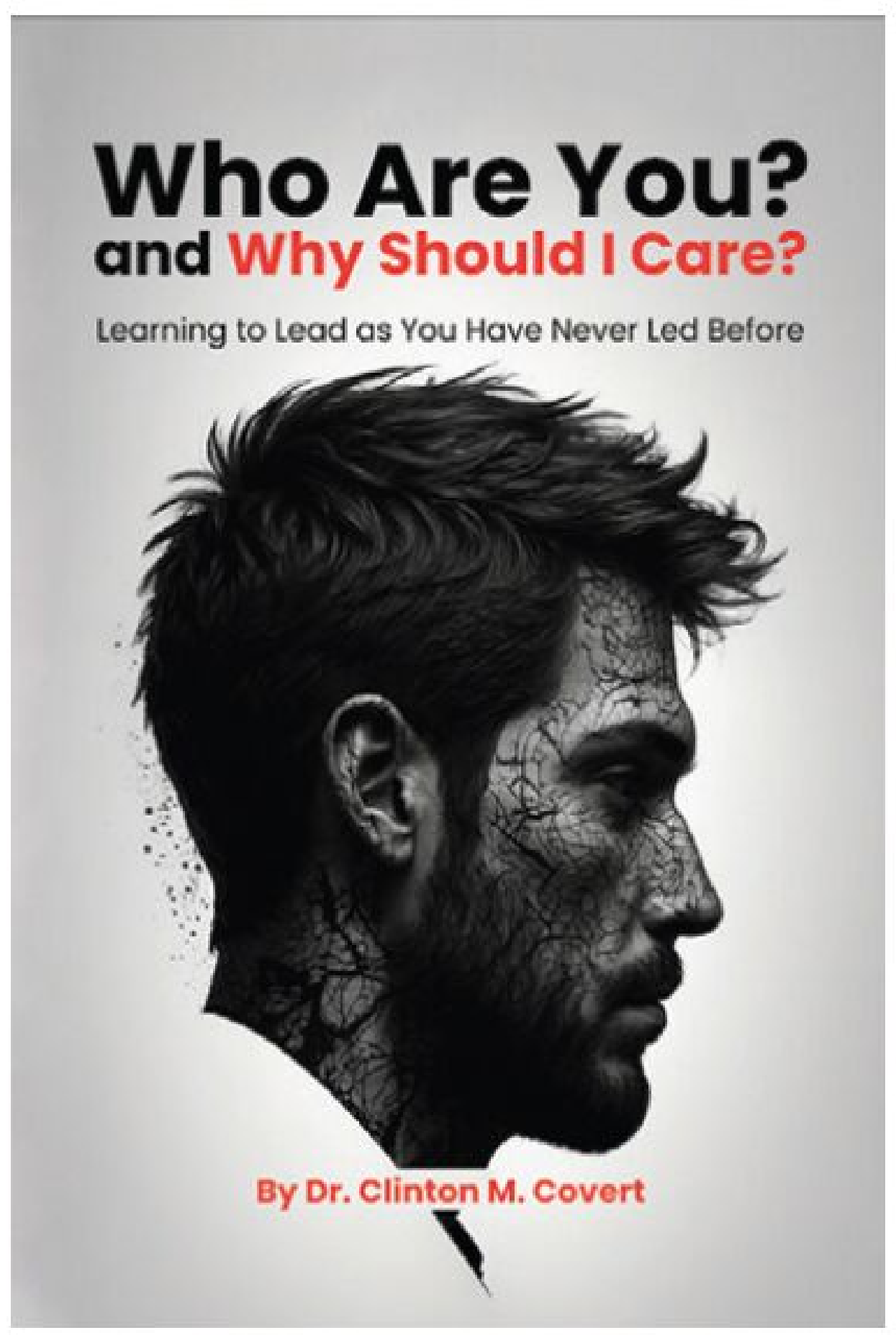
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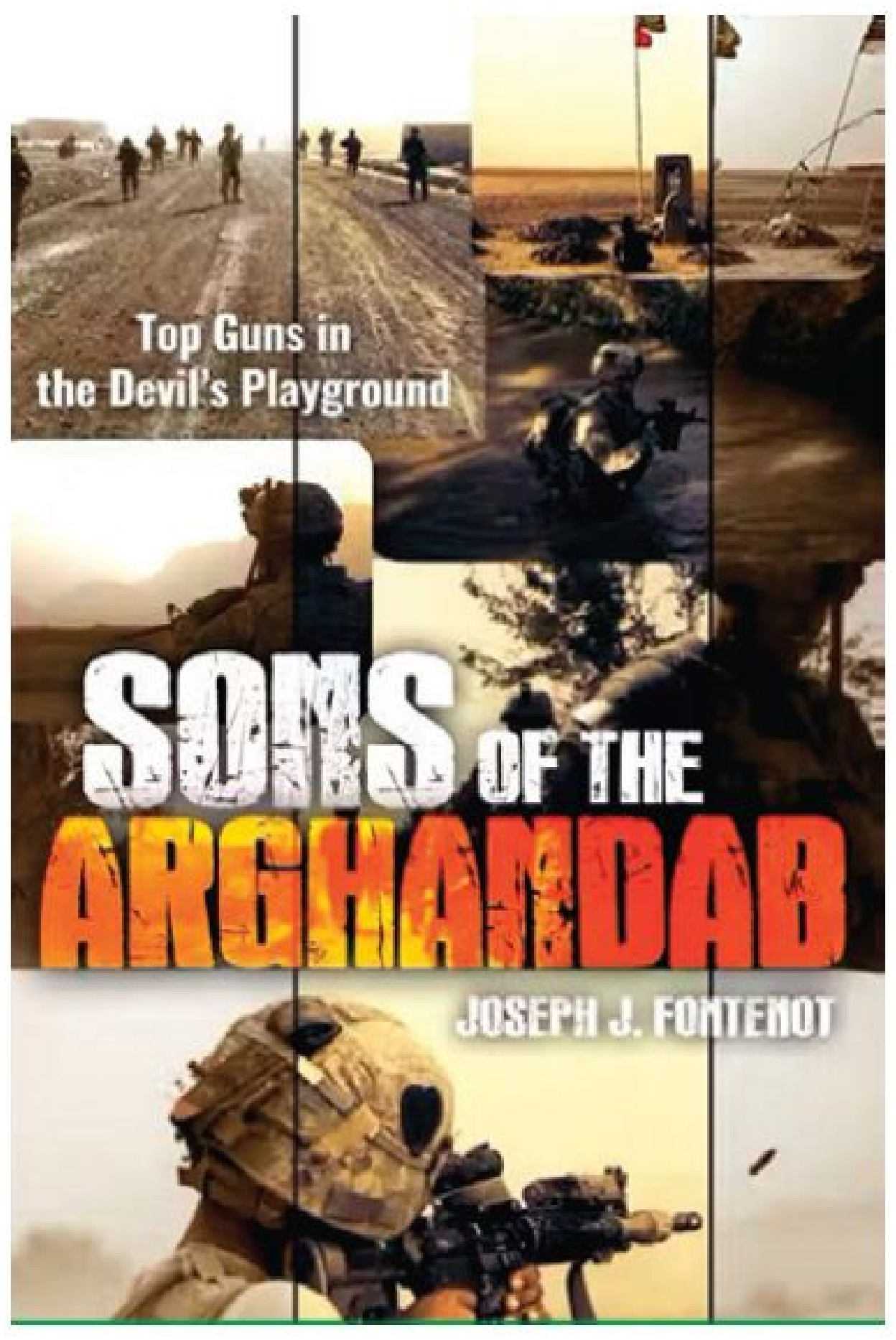
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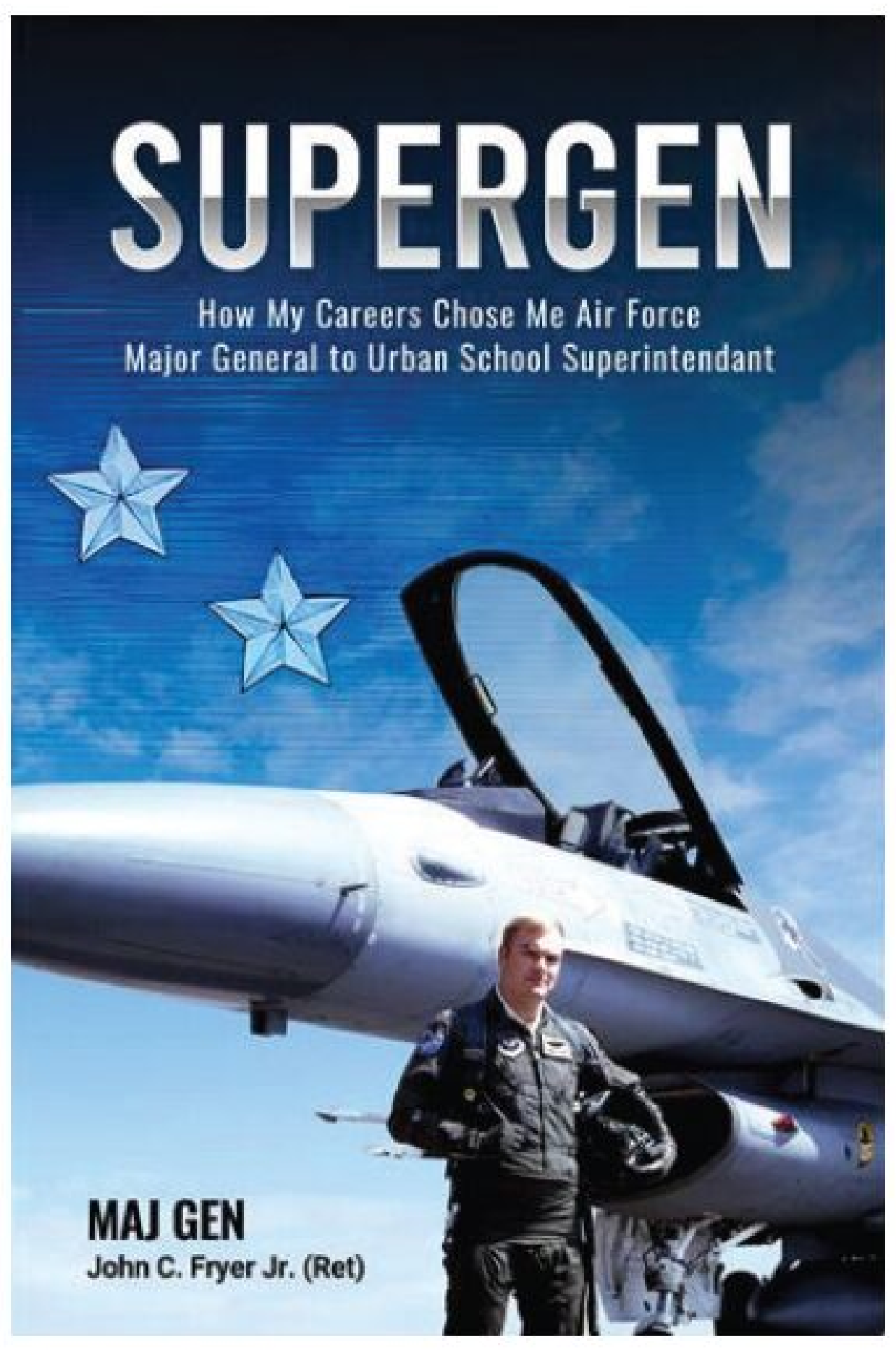
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VETERANS VOLUNTEER LONGER, VOTE MORE OFTEN THAN CIVILIAN PEERS, REPORT SAYS

BY LEO SHANE III

Veterans remain more likely to participate in elections and spend more time volunteering with local charities than their civilian peers, but the gap in that civic engagement has decreased in recent years, according to a recently released study.

Officials behind the 2025 Veterans Civic Health Index — compiled by the advocacy group We the Veterans and Military Families and the National Conference on Citizenship — said the findings likely reflect broader changes in community involvement and do not appear to be a sign of veterans stepping away from volunteer and leadership positions.

"We're seeing, both across veterans and civilians, that there is a slight drop in many civic health measures," said Chris Marvin, primary author of the report. "And we should be concerned about that."

The report, which first debuted in 2021, showed a significant gap in veterans' willingness to volunteer with community groups, engage with local officials and participate in community activities.

This year's survey, meanwhile, revealed a smaller gap.

Veterans and civilians reported volunteering at similar rates (27% vs 28%), but veterans who gave time to local groups averaged 93 hours of in charitable work, compared to 69 hours among the non-veteran respondents.

Veterans were also more likely to donate to non-political causes (56% vs 50% for non-veterans), spend time talking to neighbors (33% vs. 28% for non-veterans) and belong to a local civic group (32% vs. 25% for non-veterans).

Nearly three-fourths of veterans surveyed (73%) voted in the 2024 elections, compared to about 66% for non-veteran voters.

Roughly 64% of veterans voted in their last local election cycle, compared to approximately 53% for non-veterans.

But most of those participation markers were below 2021 levels.

The report said no single cause can be identified for the drop, but noted that the increased political polarization in the United States in recent years, as well as persistent misconceptions about widespread mental health issues among the veteran population, may have played a factor.

Marvin said he hopes the findings underscore the need for civic groups to seek out and recruit veterans, not out of pity but out of need.

"So many organizations … their first thought is, 'We need to help the poor, down-and-out veteran,'" he said. "Folks should be thinking, 'I have a problem to solve, and who can help me solve it? Probably veterans.'"

The report also notes that family members connected to service members and veterans also appear more likely to be connected to community causes, although research data into their contributions is less available than the veterans figures.

Ben Keiser, executive chairman of We the Veterans and Military Families, said officials hope to build on that work over the coming years in order to better show the full value they bring to local communities.

"If we're more intentional about recruiting veterans and military family members, more will step up," he said. "We'll see more investment, and more in terms of absolute numbers of people volunteering."

The full report is now available on the We the Veterans and Military Families website. ■

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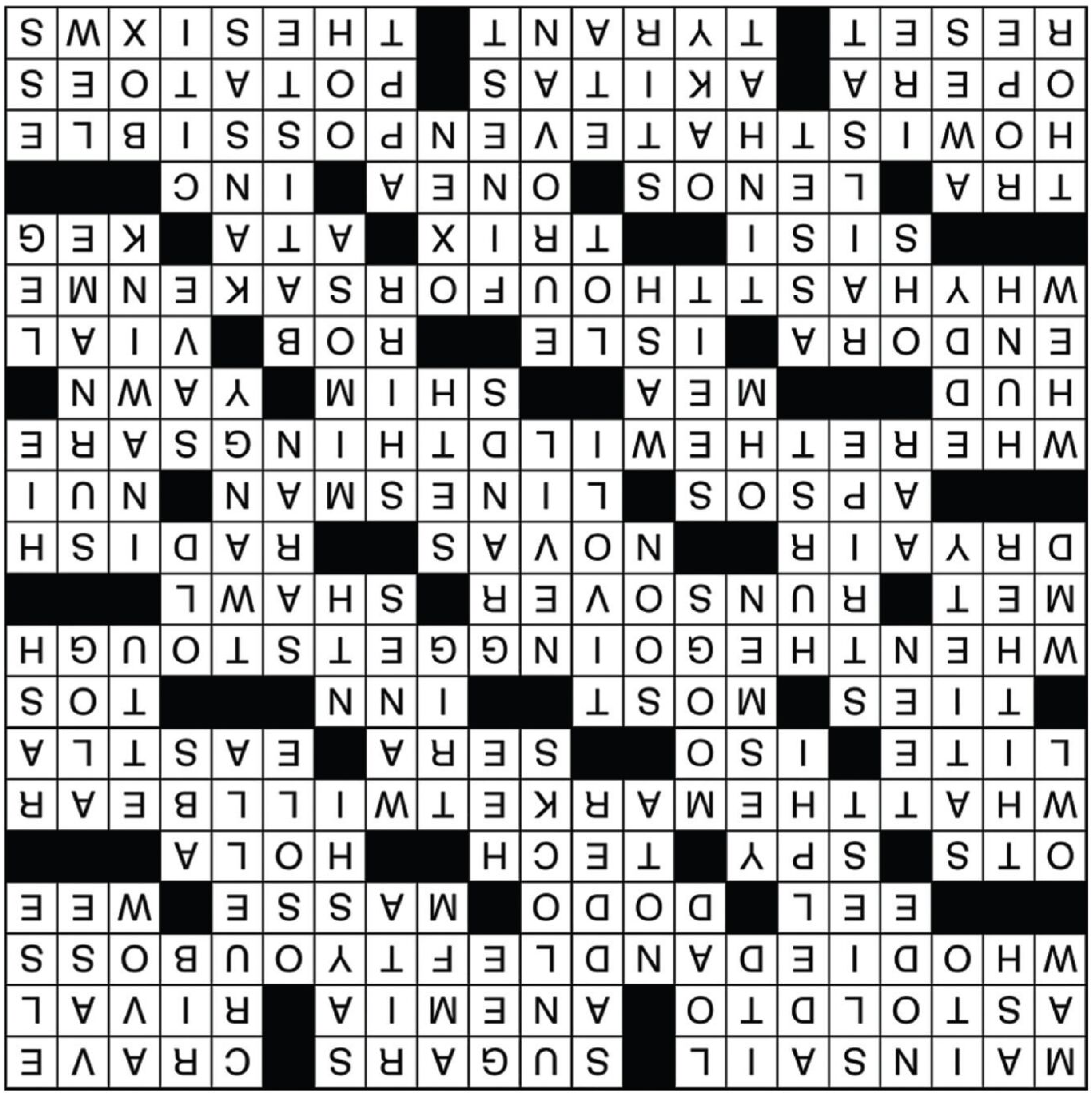

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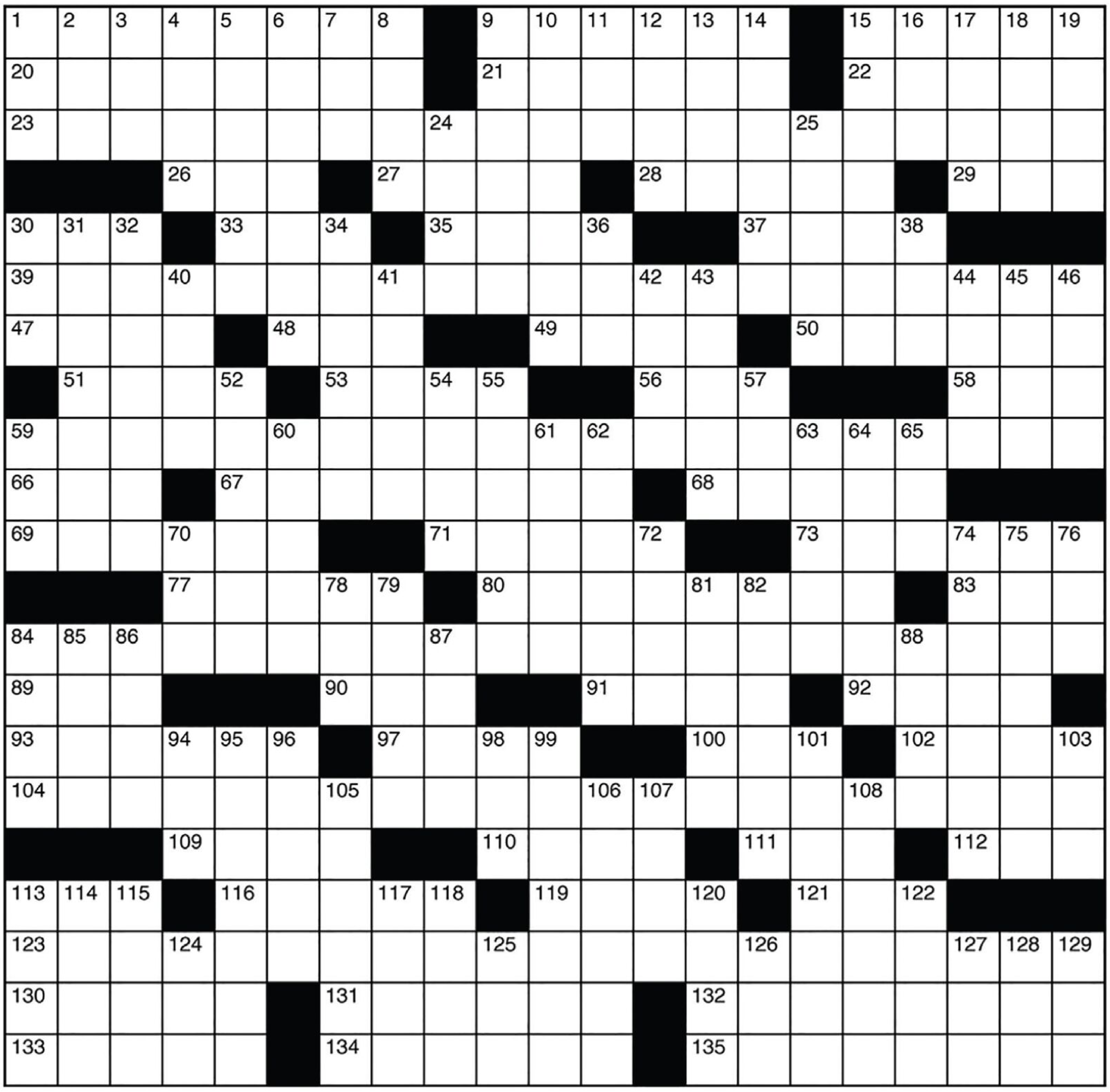
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1 Principal part of a ship's rigging
9 Glucose and dextrose
15 Want greatly
20 Phrase before a memoir co-author
21 Result of iron deficiency
22 Opponent
23 Question to someone barking orders
26 Wriggly fish
27 Extinct bird
28 Swerving billiards shot
29 Teeny
30 Suspenseful NFL periods
33 CIA worker
35 PC fixer, e.g.
37 "Hey, amigo"
39 Highest price customers are amenable to paying
47 "Less filling" Miller beer
48 Prefix similar to "equi-"
49 Vaccination fluids
50 Neighbor of Monterey Park, Calif.
51 Connections
53 Maximum
56 Rustic hotel
58 Lean- – (simple huts)
59 Time to steel oneself and power through
66 Congregated
67 Goes past the time limit
68 Cold shoulder preventer?
69 A humidifier moistens it
71 Suddenly blazing stars
73 Pungent salad veggie
77 Lhasa – (small dogs)
80 Official assisting a referee
83 "Rapa- –" (1994 Esai Morales film)
84 Classic Maurice Sendak book
89 Cabinet dept. focused on homes
90 "– culpa"
91 Wedge for filling a gap
92 Show fatigue reflexively
93 Mother on "Bewitched"
97 Aruba, e.g.
100 Steal from
102 Medicine bottle
104 Jesus' words after "My God, my God," in Matthew
109 "You bet!," in Baja
110 Favorite cereal of a "silly rabbit"
111 "I'm – loss for words"
112 Pub barrel
113 "La-la" lead-in
116 "Jay – Garage"
119 Best draft status
121 Business mag
123 Response upon hearing about an astonishing feat
130 "Aida," e.g.
131 Dogs from Japan
132 They often get mashed
133 Stopwatch button
134 Despotic ruler
135 They begin this puzzle's long answers

DOWN

1 Greedy gullet
2 Fire residue
3 Figure skater Midori
4 Central point
5 Superlatively sneaky
6 University on Long Island
7 "– be an honor"
8 Put freight in
9 Less happy
10 Opens with a key
11 "Well, I'll be!"
12 Radio toggle letters
13 Actress Hayworth
14 Gives a quick greeting
15 Disney villainess De Vil
16 Chest bone
17 State boldly
18 Rose holder
19 Otherwise
24 – bene
25 "– Mio"
30 Hooting bird
31 Toward there
32 Feeling of fullness
34 Sycophantic guys
36 Bray syllable
38 Crunches tone them
40 High schooler, e.g.
41 Some rock band synthesizers
42 Calc prereq
43 Subsides
44 Caesar's final reproach
45 Bump on –
46 Unduly quick
52 Zebra feature
54 Shortly
55 Resort town near Rome
57 High degree
59 H-bomb, e.g.
60 "Lummox" author Fannie
61 "A Town Like Alice" author Shute
62 Large pianos
63 Clingy wrap
64 Like a banjo's sound
65 On in years
70 Bern's river
72 Comic Rogen
74 Very shortly
75 "Smith" is the commonest one in the United States
76 Hasten
78 Resistance unit
79 Understand the point
81 Bake, as an egg
82 Brunch cocktail
84 "Close call!"
85 "Come again?"
86 Water swirl
87 Do laundry
88 Goalie's goal
94 Elle King's "Ex's & –"
95 Lambastes
96 Valuable trait
98 Auction unit
99 Former Volkswagen seven-seater
101 "Freedom" singer Jon
103 Shin's place
105 Soldier's steel helmet
106 Best in quality
107 Yaks, e.g.
108 Wichita site
113 Thunder god
114 Lasso, e.g.
115 Stupefies
117 Tasting of wood, as wine
118 Move a bit
120 Session with a dr., e.g.
122 – Field (Mrs. Met's home)
124 Deep anger
125 Greek vowel
126 "La-la" lead-in
127 Fight like Ali
128 Actor Ayres
129 Snaky letter

CROSSWORD SOLUTION *page 54*

Coast Guard Cutter Alex Haley patrols the Aleutian Islands near Great Sitkin.

PO3 DALE ARNOULD/COAST GUARD

WHERE THE ARCTIC MEETS THE PACIFIC: AMERICA'S OVERLOOKED FRONTLINE

BY IRIS FERGUSON

While the recent meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Alaska underscored the Arctic's decisive importance, there was another signal coming from just offshore: Russian and Chinese naval forces conducting a joint exercise near the Aleutians.

In the north Indo-Pacific, a geostrategic game is unfolding, one in which control over sea lanes, resources and influence will shape the 21st century. And Washington has been slow to catch up.

Despite Alaska's undeniable role in the Indo-Pacific, providing a launch pad for force projection and missile defense, for three decades America has let its Pacific Arctic flank erode.

Only sustained attention, disciplined use of new funding and closer work with allies and partners will keep America from losing ground to competitors who already understand its value.

The Indo-Pacific Arctic has become one of the most active arenas of great power competition.

Russia and China, while not allies, are cooperating here with arguably greater depth than anywhere else in the world.

Their joint naval patrols are no longer rare events but recurring, normalized operations, reinforced by last summer's first combined bomber patrol and growing coast guard coordination.

Their economic partnership has deepened as well, with China investing billions in Russia's Arctic energy and mineral projects.

And Beijing is not simply riding Moscow's coattails; it is operating independently, with five Chinese research vessels currently underway near Alaska.

If these operations unfolded along Florida's shoreline, they would dominate the front pages and trigger emergency hearings. Near Alaska's waters, they barely register.

In response to this unprecedented level of cooperation, the Pentagon has taken notice. Over a span of several weeks, INDOPACOM and NORTHCOM combined two of DOD's most important exercises for the region — Northern Edge and Arctic Edge — for the first time.

With thousands of air, maritime and ground forces, the goal was to signal that Alaska and the Arctic are a strategic hinge between the Indo-Pacific and North America and to eradicate the challenging seam that exists between them.

While the commanders of INDOPACOM and NORTHCOM deserve great credit for coming together, momentum must be sustained.

Bridging the lines between the Arctic's multiple combatant commands is essential to close operational gaps, preserve stability and present a unified front in the face of competing interests that converge in the far north.

Against this backdrop, the recent reconciliation bill offers an opening that may not come again soon for the North American

Arctic. From $8.6 billion for much needed icebreaker development to $24.4 billion for missile defense and the Golden Dome, developing these capabilities would aid homeland defense and our broader objectives in the Indo-Pacific.

The challenge will be executing them on time and within budget.

Equally important is $115 million buried within the bill for the Defense Department to explore and develop existing Arctic infrastructure, including in Alaska.

These upgrades, from long neglected maintenance on existing bases to the creation of future operating sites, are vital for operations in one of the world's most unforgiving regions, yet they have repeatedly been pushed to the margins of funding priorities.

History underscores the urgency. The Aleutians were the only part of the continental United States invaded and occupied by enemy forces during World War II.

Today, those same islands form a natural bridge between the Arctic and Indo-Pacific theaters.

Adak provides a perfect example — once a vital Cold War and WWII military hub in the Aleutians, it remains strategically positioned and should be strongly considered for reopening.

The U.S. should identify, prioritize and execute projects now, while the legislative window and political will are aligned.

The Pentagon in particular must act decisively, not stall in pursuit of the perfect analysis.

While this funding may be game changing, it only scratches the surface of what's required to compete in the North American Arctic.

Beyond icebreakers and missile defense, America needs resilient communications networks, reliable energy in the cold, sensors that see farther and unmanned platforms that endure longer in extreme conditions.

Just as vital is sustained scientific research, which is not a luxury but a foundation for national security.

Without continuous investment in understanding the Arctic's rapidly changing environment, the U.S. and its allies will be operating blind in one of the world's harshest theaters.

Meeting these requirements is far beyond the capacity of any single nation, which makes allied investment and partnership not optional in the Arctic but indispensable.

The U.S. cannot go it alone in the Arctic. Even Russia, with its vast northern coastline, seems to recognize the necessity of relying on others. The colder, more austere Indo-Pacific side of the Arctic is especially demanding and expensive, and success will hinge on shared capabilities, presence and investment.

While the European Arctic rightly receives significant attention through NATO allies, far less focus has been given to the equally critical Indo-Pacific front. Beyond NATO and NORAD, the U.S. has an untapped opportunity to deepen cooperation with Japan and South Korea.

Both nations bring advanced technology, maritime expertise and shared concerns over Russian and Chinese intentions, making them natural collaborators in securing the high north and linking Arctic security to broader Indo-Pacific stability.

Ultimately, these partnerships are not only about deterring threats, but about building the ties of cooperation that keep the Arctic peaceful.

But partnership cannot be taken for granted. Allies will only stand shoulder to shoulder in the Arctic if Washington demonstrates sustained trust, credibility and respect.

Lastly, Arctic advocacy and action only happens with great intention, and the region needs leadership empowered to demand and coordinate the unique capabilities that the Arctic requires.

My former position fulfilled exactly that role for the Department of Defense. Personnel is policy, and if the U.S. is serious about ensuring security in the Arctic, while also advancing stability and opportunity, it will need dedicated leadership.

Without it, the Arctic risks falling through the cracks of bureaucratic seams, allowing competitors to set the pace in a region where time is not on our side. ■

Iris Ferguson is the former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Arctic and Global Resilience and is currently president of IAF Strategies, specializing in national security and strategic innovation.

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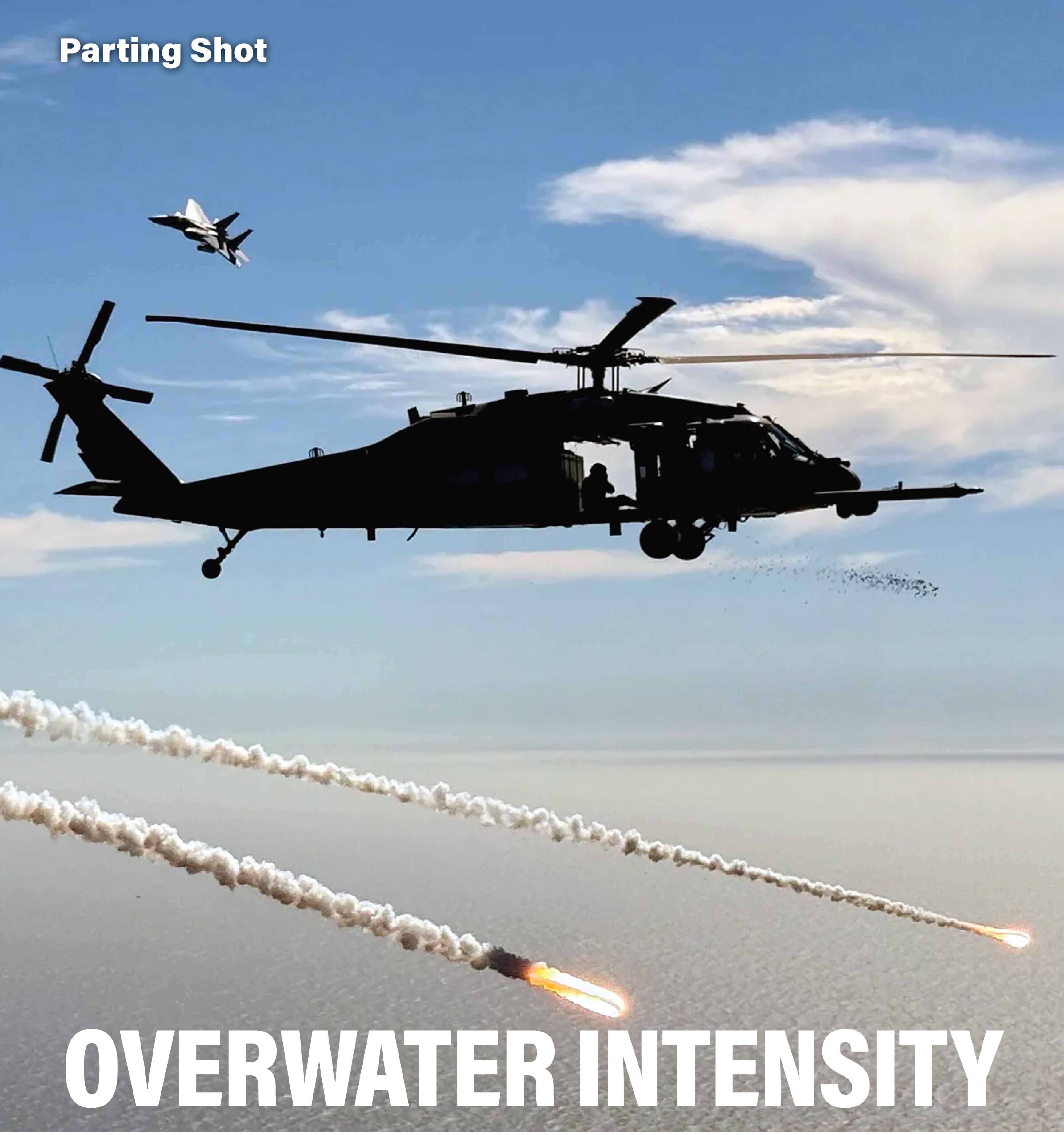

OVERWATER INTENSITY

An Air Force HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter deploys countermeasure flares as an F-15D Eagle maneuvers nearby during a joint overwater test flight in California. The exercise saw two helicopters test defense measures during unprecedented training conducted by the Air National Guard, Air Force Reserve and U.S. Navy.
Air Force photo

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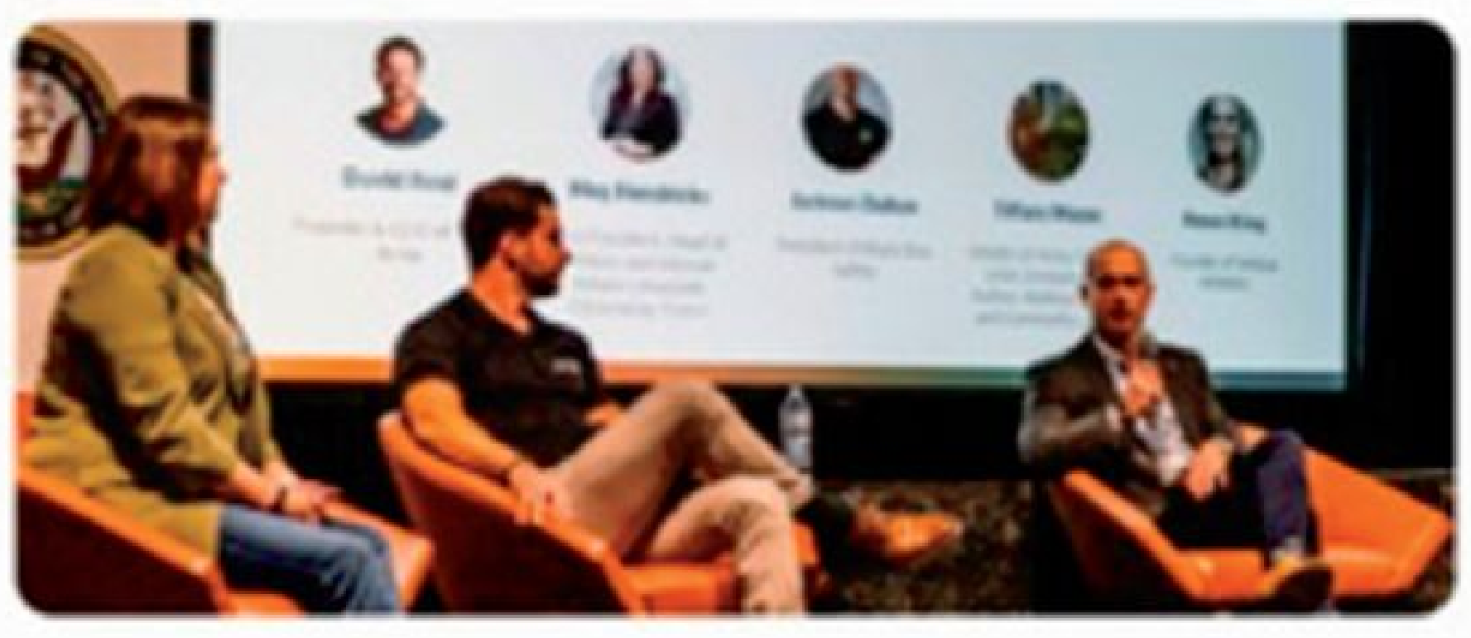

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Thursday Oct 23, 2025

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MCON Health
Friday Oct 24, 2025

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Friday Oct 24, 2025

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